

Take Two (Inaction) by myrtlewilson

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Summary:

Richie saved Eddie from being killed by It after seeing what could have happened in the Deadlights. Eddie's death wasn't the only thing he saw, though. And now it's starting to take its toll on him.

1. Chapter 1

After the third month, Richie wanted to take back anything he said before to Beverly about her Deadlight nightmares just being dream as he sat up just in time to catch most of the vomit in his bedside trash can.

His brain rushed, replaying the dream as shaking hands pulled the plastic bucket up to his knees.

The creature knocked him down, sending him sprawling on his back. Wheezing, wind punched out of his lungs, Richie tried to sit up but found his head throbbing with a pain so intense his stomach rolled with nausea.

One of It's tentacles wrapped around his legs, locking him in place.

"Richie..., " It cooed. "Do you want to play a game? It'll be a real fun one."

The room spun. Or maybe that was the concussion. Where the fuck was everybody?

"I know. Let's play Two Truths... and a Lie."

The noise that left his mouth was a mix of pain and utter sickness, nails digging into the dirt ground in an attempt to sit up. He belched, suddenly, tasting Chinese food. Chinese food? Christ wasn't Jade like three days ago – shouldn't it have digested by then?

"You go first – but wait!" It jerked Richie upright, another tentacle coming to wrap around his midsection and throat to prop him up, forcing him to look at the terrible beast. "You don't even have to say a word. I know you're not feeling well, poor boy. Poor sick, dirty, disgusting boy."

Hate and embarrassment burned in Richie's gut and he could feel his face flush. He opened his mouth to yell back at It, but all that came out was a gasp as the appendage around his throat twisted tighter.

"Ah, ah, ah!" It tutted. "Let me guess! Don't spoil the fun."

Holy shit, the room was spinning, spinning, spinning, spinning. Spit

dribbled down Richie's chin.

"Secrets are so much fun..."

He was pulled higher into the air, so high that he wasn't even sure if there was a ground anymore, if he was even under Derry.

Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was already dead, and this was hell.

Alone.

With this thing.

Forever.

"HMMMMM.... Your mother always wanted a little girl and hates who you are, thinks you're just so... strange." Well, that wasn't a lie, anyone who talked to Maggie for three minutes could tell that. "I ate all your friends while you were dozing right here on the ground and saved you for last, a toothpick to clean my teeth with."

Richie never understood the phrase 'made his blood run cold' before: Not it books when he read it, not in movies when narrators said it. But just then a chill shook his arms and legs, putting his hairs on end like he licked a 9-volt and got kicked in the sac at the same time.

"No!" He rasped. "You're ly—,"

It roared, shaking him up and down as if Richie was a soda just waiting to pop and be sprayed across the floor "Hey – no cheating! You can't spoil the game!"

He couldn't help it. Despite the tentacle wrapped around his throat, vomit sprayed from his lips and clotted both on the creature and the front of his shirt. Rather than sicken It, the beast seemed almost amused.

"We always knew you were sick," It said, but not in the voice Richie had come to know. Rather, in some horrific up choir of his friend's voices, coming from one mouth. "We always knew you were... diseased."

Eddie's was the loudest.

Richie's body rocked in real-time, purging his stomach once more.

He can barely choke out the whimpered, "stop," before he found himself falling. Things went black for a moment, then grey, then black again. Richie found himself wondering if It dropped him enough times, would he just go brain dead before being eaten? Maybe it wasn't the number of times but the height. Did it matter if It had the right velocity?

And maybe, just maybe, that wouldn't be so bad -- like when they euthanize a dog. It's just like going to sleep.

Sleep sounded like heaven.

God what he wouldn't give to get a full night's sleep.

"Wake up, asshole!" Something connected with the side of his face. It stung like a whip crack.

Richie garbled out an unintelligible noise. Couldn't he just sleep? Something was screaming so loud it somehow made breathing difficult.

"C'mon man!" A different voice.

His eyes fluttered open for a moment and he could make out the silhouette of a dark wisp of hair with a white, blood stained bandage slapped to the cheek. "Ed'de?"

"Richie, I think I got it!!"

The ground shook as a deep, hellish voice rung out "I'LL KILL YOU! LITTLE PESTS!" Something fell, inches from his head and the splash of dust across Richie's face let him know it was probably a rock from the ceiling. "LITTLE FREAKS!"

It.

Eddie.

EDDIE!

Adrenaline surged through him, ripping his eyes open and causing him to gasp.

"Eddie!" An emotion, every emotion he'd ever felt in his pathetic life, welled up through him then. In the dark of the cave Richie could just barely make out Eddie, his features illuminated every few seconds by Deadlight swirl above them as It writhed about in pain.

Richie raised a hand and touched it to the juncture of Eddie's neck and jaw. For a moment, everything seemed okay.

"I think I got It, Rich!" The mirth in Eddie's voice made Richie 13 years old again, high off the adrenaline of beating the Bowers Bunch in the Apocalyptic Rock Fight. He could see a flash of teeth in the darkness. "I think It's --,"

But of course, nothing was okay. And as one of It's appendages burst through Eddie's chest, spraying his blood across Richie's glasses and blinding him to anything but the pain of his friend (just a friend).

"Richie..., " Eddie could barely gurgle out the name.

Richie could only watch in anguish as the other man opened his mouth to cry out as It lifted him up, high, higher -----

He retched one last time, but nothing came out. Just a burp. Fuck, that smelled. His morning alarm on the phone began to chime, a cheery fucking little jingle. It had replaced the death rattle for the last couple of nights, except for this one apparently.

Were Richie more awake, he might even laugh.

Giving one more cursory spit into the can, he watched as the loogie slid off the side of the plastic and joined the rest of the sick in its ooze. After a few nights in he had finally wised up to lining the bin with a Rite Aid bag instead of having to scrub it out in the morning.

After a moment, he remembered the phone alarm was still going off. Richie groaned. Reaching out for it under the pillows where he usually pushed it just before sleep, he found it and flicked it off.

Before going back to Derry, almost a whole year before, he had begged and pleaded for his manager to consider a pitch he'd written -- a dark comedy. He didn't want to be pigeonholed in stand up his entire life, and especially not for raunchy humor. Fastforward and,

somehow, somewhere, someone at HBO had found it netting him a first season. He'd actually cried when he found out. This could be the difference between a Comedy Central special every so often and mainstream. Movie deals, red carpets, magazines -- the works.

Then It -- both literally and figuratively -- happened, a week before the all-cast script read through was scheduled. After all the strings he'd pulled for Richie, his manager hadn't taken too kindly to him fucking off to god-knows-where Maine for a week when all this was going down, so he was being held to a tighter leash than usual.

That meant up by 7:30 a.m. so he could shower, try to eat, and be to the session studio sometime between 9 and 9:30 a.m. so they could rehearse.

But with the dreams now becoming a capital-T Thing, he was lucky if he could sleep until 5 a.m., where afterwards he would eventually drift back off to sleep after tossing and turning, only to be woken up like this -- covered in sweat and really needing to get up now or traffic would make him even later than usual.

Setting an alarm was more out of laziness than necessity. While it wasn't like he'd been sleeping more than a few consecutive hours a night anyways, he also didn't want to turn it off out of fear he'd, for once, sleep in. The last thing he needed was to lose this gig, on top of everything else.

And if he was in an extra hour early -- good. Not like his manager cared, anyways. It was "a nice change of pace" Richie was taking this so seriously, Greg had told him last week. Richie maybe would have been more offended Greg thought so little of him if he weren't worried about going narcoleptic in the middle of practice.

Flicking away the G O O D M O R N I N G! that filled his screen, his screen filled with notifications: monthly bank statement, NPR morning news alert, some NFL injury recap report, a few emails. Richie wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. Satisfied there was nothing immediate that needed his attention, he clicked the phone off Do Not Disturb mode and set it on the bedside table.

He sighed and stood up, groaning as his knees clicked. Christ, getting

old sucked.

“Alexa,” he groaned, throat dry from sleeping with his mouth open most of the night. “Play my morning playlist.”

The robotic voice chimed back to him, words muffled from the other room. The Bluetooth speaker in the bathroom clicked to life. The opening twang of “Here Comes Your Man” echoed in the small, tiled space.

Shower on and running, scalding, he took care to only wash his body with a quick scrub. He could shave in the shower, but he didn’t see a point -- plus, he washed his thinning curls yesterday. Even if they were squashed, some of their volume having been lost to sleep, he could easily get away with a baseball cap.

It wasn’t like he had anyone to impress anyways since no cameras were allowed in the warehouse rehearsal space. Then he realized: Junkets would start soon (okay, maybe not for another half year, but still). Even if his show didn’t pick up any traction, there would still be cameras and small interviews. That was probably reason alone to start hitting the gym.

He rinsed off and toweled down before realizing Natasha Beddingfield had come on the playlist -- huh, he didn’t remember putting this song on here. Either way, it was pretty catchy. He hummed along as he wiped down the mirror just enough so he could see his face through the fog.

Eyes puffy, under skin speckled with cracked blood vessels from throwing up, skin brittle -- God, he’d seen enough. He pressed some toner, and once that soaked, moisturizer to his face. He didn’t usually go for hardcore skin care, knowing some of his coworkers religiously followed 12-step Korean beauty routines every morning and night, but it was the least he could do to not look totally disheveled.

Or, at least try not to. His slight paunch bumped against the counter top.

Yeah. Definitely gym soon. While he was lucky studio didn’t require any hardcore body transformation for this piece, it would be passing

out diet plans soon.

Better he say goodbye to late night tacos and beers on his own terms than go cold turkey.

He pulled Vaseline and deodorant from the vanity and put both on, too. If he stared any longer in the mirror Richie knew he'd start to pick and fuss. After realizing all of the Losers had aged so much better than he had, even Bill with his prematurely graying hair, Richie decided more effort on his part was needed to step up his proverbial game.

Not like it would reverse years of drinking and poor eating habits overnight, but he could try.

He left the damp towel on the back of the bathroom door to dry and made his way, naked, back into the bedroom. He dressed quickly in a baseball tee and tight fitted jeans. The hat would have to wait for his hair to dry more, unless he wanted his scalp to itch something fierce.

Richie looked to the bedside clock: just shy of 8 a.m. Not bad. He could eat if he wanted to, but the hollow feel of his stomach told him that it wouldn't be for the best. A cup of coffee, maybe a piece of dry toast, would be the best thing he'd get before noon. He never really was a breakfast person anyways.

He looked back to the mirror attached to his standing dresser and wondered if he could get away with concealer to hide the burst blood vessels under his eyes before remembering -- he lived in Los Angeles. A dude wearing concealer was the least of anyone's problems.

His phone rattled against the wood of the table in a short buzz. A text, then. There were only a handful of people who would send him things this early, and most of them didn't live in the same timezone as he did which narrowed it down to three people: Mike, Bill, or Eddie. Maybe his mother, but he sincerely doubted it.

He flipped it over, surprised to be wrong. It was Beverly.

>*Are you still hosting that Skype sesh?*< It read. Then another pinged in: > *It's on Sunday night, right?*<

Huh. *Fuck*, he thought, *How could he forget about that?*

< shouldn't you be asleep marsh >

> Richie, most normal adults are up by now... it's like 8 <

He pulled down the top part of his phone screen to check the date. A new message pinged from Bev. OK, today was Tuesday. Five days then. He could try to turn around his sleep schedule by then, right? Another ping from Bev.

"Christ," he said aloud.

The woman was ruthless.

> Also answer the question <

> Pls <

<jesus calm down bev>

< also when haev you EVER known me to be normal >

Richie scrubbed a hand over his face. Since Pennywise, the six of them had taken to doing Skype sessions every so often, just to be able to see each other. At first, it started out of the need to quell a shared fear -- if they were able to forget each other once, who was to say it wouldn't happen again? And with Mike leaving Derry, that fear was even more founded.

They had no anchor to hold their memories down this time, no buoy to swim back to.

It was Richie, even, who had suggested it making it.

< or an adult >

They would usually just shoot the shit and drink. Sometimes they'd stream a movie. Sometimes they'd play online card or board games. It was decided to make the switch to digital when everyone realized Ben had a competitive streak which may or may not have caused him to cheat once. Or four times.

At least Bev was there to call him out, though it was easier to monitor online and infinitely more fun to rib him for it.

But it was December now, just barely. The end of this week would mark three months, to the day, since killing It. While they didn't think any longer the creature's spell would cause them to forget each other, especially with It being dead, it had become... habit.

Honestly, it was nice. Before their little Derry reunion, Richie would kill himself before admitting it but he was kinda lonely. People in this town were phony, just like the stereotype went -- only interested in you if you knew a producer or someone higher up the food chain. For a C-cum-B Lister like Richie, it was always a crapshoot if someone was being genuine or not.

> **OMG Please answer the question!** <

He had missed the November call, though passing out too early and sleeping through any attempt for Bev or Ben to ring him. When they tried to reschedule to accommodate him, he slept through it again. If he missed again, the other Losers might start to become suspicious as to why he was so tired.

But he couldn't help it.

< *ooh punctuation, someones real serious about this huh* >

He'd tried basically everything to stop the dreams.

Before she can reply, he texted off one last message before throwing the phone back into his sheets and getting dressed: < **ANYWAYS i'll try. promise. busy schedule. y'all know how it is.** >

Was it the truth? He padded off to pull on some underwear.

Eh.

Probably.

2. Chapter 2

Transitioning back to normal life after It was... well it was hard, to say the absolute least.

Eddie didn't realize how sheltered his life was, how much he lived under Myra's thumb, until the veil had been lifted from his eyes upon realizing the horrors which lurked under Derry. Which is funny, in its own way. He lived most of his life under his mother's thumb in that very town up until almost being killed by It gave him a major attitude adjustment. And it took nearly being killed by that same, stupidass clown *again* to realize he wasn't living his own life.

It also took being confronted by his friends from nearly three decades ago, jumping headfirst into a quarry which amazingly did not give him *Streptococcus dysgalactiae*, to realize this, even if they didn't know the roles they were playing.

Upon coming home -- though it was more like just coming to a place where he lived -- Eddie acted.

To the outsider, it probably looked like he had snapped: disappearing for a few days, coming home, filing for a divorce and letting his wife -- ex, now -- keep the house no questions asked. Sure, he demanded a split of the assets, things Myra wouldn't immediately destroy on his way out the door like the cabin they had near Lake Placid and several stocks they had mutually invested in, but really, everything else in that house wasn't his.

It was Myra's, masquerading like it meant anything to him.

But of course Myra wouldn't take it rolling over. She was exactly like his mother, in that sense: Once she sank her claws into something, it was hers and hers alone. Forever. When Eddie served the papers, she didn't just refuse to sign them -- she laughed in his face. When she realized he was serious, the laughter turned to crocodile tears and pretty words that falsely promised they could work whatever this was out. (Which was the biggest joke, all things considering, as they both knew this marriage was a shame to begin with.)

When he doubled down, his lawyers told him that this could take anywhere from six weeks to the better part of a year. Even if Eddie was willing to hand everything over -- and he was, more or less -- she still wanted the one thing she couldn't have: Him.

That was in September. Now, months later, he would occasionally catch himself wondering: even if it felt like the right thing to do in the moment -- was it? Long days at work, quiet nights alone afterward, nothing really to moor him to New York except the ease of being able to meet Myra for divorce proceedings every few weeks. Shit, he was currently eating Kashi cereal over the sink for dinner because he didn't think to buy a dining room table as he didn't really know how much longer, or even if, he wanted to stay in the Big Apple.

The work, the stress, it all made it seem... rather unappealing.

He told as much to Bill, the only person he had told thus far about his separation from Myra, who was currently on speakerphone.

"Man, c'mon, don't say that," said Bill. "From what you told me, you and her--"

Eddie swallowed a mouthful of cereal. "I know! I know what I said but I just... I just don't know what to do, you know?"

Painful as it was to admit, it was easier to live blindly under Myra. She made all the decisions. She decided when it was time for vacation and where they would go. She decided groceries and date nights and friend groups. Everything down to the drapes was her decision.

Given the opportunity to chose for himself for the first time since he was nearly 30 -- it was terrifying.

He could hear Bill ticka-tapa-typing on the other end of the line. He hummed, which Eddie took as a go-ahead to keep talking.

"I have money, so like, that's not a problem." He shoveled the last of the peanut butter clusters into his mouth. "And I don't really care if I have a big house, or even a house at all. Just like, some place that's

clean. And mine. You know? But like this whole bachelor at 40 life is like, definitely not as sexy as the fucking movies make it sound.”

Bill snorted. “What ‘fucking movies’ are you watching?”

“Shut it, asswipe.”

“I mean, I could just hang up on you.”

“Oh yeah? And go back to what, not finishing your book?”

“ *Excuse* me? You can literally hear me workin--,”

“You wouldn’t be talking to me if you were working, dude.” Eddie drained the rest of the milk from his bowl in a long gulp and set the dishes in the sink. That’d be a problem for tomorrow him. “You go into like this self-exile thing when you write. And like, I totally understand because you need concentration and all, but like, don’t bullshit me, Bill. C’mon.”

Bill barked out some hybrid of a laugh and a sigh.

“Okay, but what if I told you it was *research* ?”

“Yeah? On what? How to write a compelling ending?”

“Christ, none of you will let that go, will you?”

Eddie snorted. “Someone’s gotta keep you humble, big Hollywood man.”

“Wouldn’t that nickname better suit like... Ben or Richie? Since, you know, they actually *live* near Hollywood?”

“Right but like,” Eddie made a face, “you actually have a hand in making movies. Richie books live shows so I guess he’d be more like... Broadway boy? And Ben’s just like, ridiculously good looking.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure Rich is gonna st-t-tar in his own special soon.”

Was he? It had been a moment since he last heard from Richie. They

had exchanged some texts since Derry, called each other once so he could tell Eddie happy birthday. They'd seen each other through the group Skype sessions -- but that was almost a month ago, now.

Shit , Eddie thought, *We haven't spoken since* ...but nothing beyond interactions solely because of group interactions came to mind.

Despite gaining most of their shared memories back, Eddie still felt something was... off, between them. They were friends before, obviously. They were friends now too. But whereas Eddie and the other Losers grew closer after Pennywise, Eddie and Richie seemed to have only drifted.

"When did he tell you this?" Eddie asked.

He made his way into his bedroom, not needing to turn on a light to make his way to the bed. He could make his way through the apartment blindfolded, if need be. Sure, it was partly because his apartment was about the size of his kitchen and living room from the old house (despite costing almost just as much) but he also liked to think it was because he kept things clean.

Bill hummed. "I dunno. Couple weeks ago, maybe? He's had it in the works since like February apparently."

"Weird."

"What?"

He shrugged, before feeling stupid about giving a nonverbal response. "Nothing, it's just -- I had no idea." Eddie pulled his socks off before crawling into bed. "You guys talk often?"

"Few texts every week or so, why?"

Eddie pursed his lips. The light of the city crept in despite his blackout curtains, casting a hazy yellow glow on small patch of carpeting. It was quiet, and he thought fleetingly, *maybe I should get a cat* before dismissing the notion entirely.

"I think Richie hates me," he said instead.

This startled a laugh out of Bill, causing Eddie to pull the phone back from his ear. "I literally don't think Richie could hate anyone, let alone you, but please -- tell me why. I'm incredibly curious."

Eddie made a noise. "I think he's avoiding me?" He meant to say it straight out but it sounded more like a tentative question. When Bill asked why, Eddie pressed on, telling him that since the day they left Derry all those months ago, he hadn't really spoken to Richie except for when they've all been together.

Bill tried to assure him it wasn't that weird, but the more Eddie spoke, the more he realized how out of the loop he had been where Richie's life was concerned.

Maybe you're just overthinking things , one side of his brain whispered as the other whispered back, *or maybe, you're not seeing the full picture here* .

"You think I did something?" He asked Bill. "Something to piss him off?"

"Do *you* think you did?" Bill shot back.

"Well, no, at least, I don't think --,"

"Then you probably didn't." Half of Bill's sentence was lost to yawn. When Eddie pulled the phone back from his ear to check the run time of the call, he was startled to find they had been talking for nearly an hour and a half. "Listen, Eddie, maybe he's just in a tight spot because of deadlines, you know? Well, maybe you don't with your field and all, but I definitely can sympathize."

"We all got deadlines, Bill."

"True, I guess, but--," there was shuffling on the other end and something that sounded like a laptop snapping shut. "What if we did this? You're right, it's been a minute since we've seen each other, yeah? Like we did at Jade of the Orient."

Eddie grimaced. "I'm pretty sure that shithole snuck cashews in my meal. I was bloated for like --,"

“Not the point. Listen,” Bill cut in. He had his Loser Leader voice on, which let Eddie know that regardless of the next thing Bill said, Eddie was going to agree to it, one way or another. “Keeping in touch over text is one thing but physically seeing each other, there’s something else to it, yeah? And how nice would it be to actually get together and not have to worry about our meal turning into some fucked up abortion crawling across the table and turning into lava.”

“You always remind me in the worst way you’re a horror novelist, Bill.”

Undeterred, Bill pressed on. “What do you say, huh?”

“Say to what?”

“Taking a trip out to California? Having our own Losers Family Christmas! Getting together for a week or so, no intergalactic killer clowns, no lepers, no stab wounds --,”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

“Eddie. Be serious.”

“I am serious!” Eddie said, indignant. “The statistical likelihood of you getting stabbed or injured as you enter a city the size of Los Angeles --”

“No, about the trip, idiot. We could even time it so that we show up for Rich’s special,” he chuckled. “Maybe even get a behind the scenes look at what he’s doing, before everyone else. Also, don’t you live in New York? Like, the murder capital of the U.S?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s St. Louis,” Eddie murmured absentmindedly. “Also, I’m pretty sure you have to get like, pre-approved to be backstage or whatever like, months in advance.”

Taking a trip, huh? Well, it wasn’t like he didn’t have the vacation time banked up. Hell, he could truthfully just quit his job tomorrow and move out to California forever with all the money he had saved up. The thought had really never crossed his mind. What he had in his bank account would float him for awhile, at least until he got a new job there -- or wherever. But something, tugging at his gut, held

him back.

“I’ve worked movies before, Eddie, and besides,” it was like he could hear Bill’s eyes roll, “I need an answer. What do you think?”

If Richie didn’t want to talk to him over text, what would he do if Eddie just showed up at his door?

“I think...” but Eddie didn’t really know what to think. He tongued at the inside of his cheek.

After Bowers stabbed him there, a pucker of skin had formed to the wall of his mouth upon healing. It originally made Eddie almost shit his pants when he first felt it, thinking it was cancer. While the wound had healed and the stitches taken out of his face, there was still a jagged pink line which bisected the left half of his cheek which facial hair didn’t quite cover. Not like he could grow a beard anyways. And, truth be told, it made him a bit self-conscious.

What made him more self-conscious, however, was the thought he’d just turned 40 and he’d spent his entire life up until this point weighing options until opportunities passed him by.

He blew a raspberry, the universal sign of resigned defeat, and threw an arm over his eyes.

“I think we should call Ben and Bev tomorrow,” Eddie said at last. “I don’t trust fucking AirBnB’s as far as I can throw them. Plus they’ll be like a million dollars around this time of year.”

Bill laughed and Eddie couldn’t help but feel like he made the right decision for once.

Eddie had been dreaming about Derry a lot recently. That was to be expected, considering he almost died there. Twice.

At first, he considered seeing a therapist. He could talk to them about Bowers or his mother or maybe how he had basically repressed his childhood for almost 30 years -- but that wasn't what he needed. Okay, maybe he did, partly, but so much of it revolved around the clown that it just seemed fruitless.

The more he dreamed, the more he remembered. The more he remembered, the more he felt -- well he didn't really know what: Sadness, melancholy, nostalgia?

That night, he dreamt about the smell of dust and a hammock. He dreamt about the press of another body against his, like two people had tried to squeeze into the same sleeping bag.

He dreamt about Richie, which was also to be expected considering... Well, he had thought about him a lot, recently.

The dam they built in the Barrens that summer was something magical and they couldn't have done it without Ben, the new boy.

"I've seen you around school," Richie had told Ben, standing waist-deep in the water collected from their project. He clapped his hands against the water's surface, sending spray everywhere. Then he looked up like he remembered they -- Ben, Stan, Eddie and Bill -- were even there.

Nodding his head at Ben, Richie said then: "This must have your idea," he smiled, a buck-toothed grin that split his face in two. "Those wet ends couldn't light a firecracker with a flamethrower."

"Speak for yourself, Richie," Eddie snapped.

"Oh -- you mean this was your idea, Eds? Jesus, I'm sorry," He pulled himself out of the water and onto the grass where the other boys stood. His shoes, which he never bothered to remove, squelched and the sound made Eddie cringe.

"Gross," he said, then clapped a hand to his mouth, hoping Richie didn't hear.

Oh, but he did. If it wasn't the word, then it was definitely Eddie's reaction, because when Richie noticed his face became positively devilish with glee. As the water had damned, it created something of a mud puddle around their project. The ground was slick with it. Eddie thought he was standing far enough away from it, but then remembered in horror: If you were in sight of Richie, you were never out of the Tozier splash zone.

He couldn't brace himself fast enough. Richie began jumping, whooping with glee as the slick slop squirted everywhere as he advanced on Eddie.

"Richie!" Eddie squealed. "Stop it, you're splattering mud on me!"

In response, Richie kicked up a massive lump of mud that clotted to both Eddie and Bill's front. Stan took several steps back, shielding himself behind Ben's mass. For his part, the new kid looked equal parts concerned and excited to be there. It wouldn't be until later that Eddie would realize the look in Ben's eyes came from being in on the joke for once, not a part of it.

Eddie shrieked. "You asshole! My mom's gonna kill me! Do you have any idea how long it'll take for her to --,"

But he blinked and suddenly Richie was in his personal space, inches from his face, pinching at it with muddied paws. Christ, when did he get mud on his hands? It smelled so bad. He wanted to gag as the thought crossed his mind that there was probably animal shit mixed into the concoction.

"Cute, cute, cute," he exclaimed as Eddie yelled back, "Stop it! I hate that!" He shut his eyes, as if it would block out the smell somehow. "You're so gross!"

But the mud became thicker, then, and the smell took on the scent of iron. Richie's pinching became more frantic and his voice dropped in pitch. The gravel of it made him shiver.

"Eddie? Eddie, please," he sounded frantic. Didn't he know it was just mud? Yeah, Eddie's mom would be mad, but Richie made it sound like someone was dying. "Man, come on wake up."

Why couldn't he open his eyes? Couldn't, or wouldn't? He was entrapped in something warm then -- maybe an embrace, maybe a blanket. Why would Richie have a blanket? Jesus, he smelled like a sewer. Sewer? No. They were in the Barrens... just a second ago, he -- Breathing in deep was hard, but when Eddie managed to, he was hit with a wave of sweat and piss and something... other.

Masculine.

Despite every instinct screaming at him to get up, to run, to hide, to fight Eddie couldn't. He wanted to be here, wherever that was. He felt safe here. He felt warm. Nuzzling deeper into the feeling, Eddie felt himself drift.

Content.

Whole.

When Eddie woke up, he was hard.

Notes for the Chapter:

We're starting to get somewhere folks. As always, beta read by me, so if you see something -- say something.

3. Chapter 3

If it wasn't for the fact that it was barely half past three on Thursday and that Richie absolutely needed to make a good impression on this director if he wanted to keep a writing credit on the project, he would be shitfaced already.

A knock at the door echoed through the single use bathroom. The time on his phone said he still had at least ten more minutes left in his break.

"Ocupado!" He called out, not bothering to look up. He was so fucking close to beating this stupid 2048 game, if he could just get the *god damn* --

"Um, Mr. Tozier?" It was a woman's voice, uneasy but insistent. "Mr. Berg wants to speak with you when you get a second, said something about script changes."

Richie sighed and told the aid he'd be out in a minute. He heard her heels clip-clip-clipping rhythmically away. Before getting up, he wooshed away the app and pulled up his messages.

There were several from Bev all time-stamped between his last text, two days ago, and now.

[Tuesday]

> **Think you'll know more about Sunday soon? <**

> **It's always more fun when you're thereeeeeeee <**

> **Also I want your opinion on a few sketches. Ben's too right-brained to be helpful. <**

[Wednesday]

> Hey, just want to make sure everything's OK? <

> Didn't hear back from you yesterday <

> We should get lunch soon. Just us. Maybe even sneak a few
cigs? ;) <

> OK well. Good night. Hope you had a good day. <

Richie pursed his lips as he read today's text, the only one: > **Can
you just let me know if you're mad at me?** <

Christ, he felt like a dick. He pocketed his phone to take care of his business.

Maybe a month after coming back, Beverly had invited him over to the place she was staying at while trying to get her things from back from Tom without a fight. In the few short days they had been in Derry, however, he had either broken or thrown away most of them -- even her mother's single diamond necklace.

(She took it off to sleep and forgot to grab it after answering Mike's call, she said. Richie couldn't blame her, he'd seen the welts. He wanted to make his way up to Beverly Hills himself and get off a few Good Ones himself, if he was honest. But it was Bev's gentle but teary eyes that stopped him.)

"I could take the hitting, fuck, even the name calling," she had said, slurring her words, "no one should have to but I figured, as long as he was hitting me, he was paying attention, you know? I can't stand being ignored. And he knew it. He knew it too and he would just stop talking to me when he was real mad. Made me feel invisible. A ghost."

It struck a deeper chord with him than Bev could ever realize and even though he was toeing the edge of blackout that night, he couldn't sleep because of her words.

Even now they rattled around in his brain. It made him feel dirty. Even if he didn't feel like it, he knew he had to text her back. He

could probably get out of the Skype session, but --

Another knock at the door made him jump.

“Mr. Tozer you’re needed back in the reading room in five,” a male voice said, to which Richie called back instinctively: “Thank you, five!”

He grimaced. Guess it was harder to knock the stage life than he thought.

Washing and drying his hands quickly, he typed out a message to Bev just before leaving the bathroom -- not what he really needed to say, but what he could give her in this moment.

< sorry bevvv babe i’ve been a real dickhead to u. On set now but i’ll call tonight? >

Read-through always took forever and starting principal photography for costuming, even longer. At the end of the night, Richie is so drained, even if he arguably didn’t do anything that strenuous, he nearly fell asleep on the drive home.

Someone he’d never heard of played on the radio. Richie’s mind wandered. In another world, a different world, he wondered what he would have been if not for an actor. A DJ? A radio host? Something where he could use his Voices, that was for sure.

He knew the longer he waited to call Bev the worse it would make him feel. He eyed his phone, upside down in his cup holder, like it was a feral dog waiting to snap.

To be fair, he never told her *when* he’d call.

Christ, Tozier, he thought to himself, grabbing for it, *get a grip* .

At the next red light, Richie unlocked it and pulled up Beverly's last message.

> **Ok** <

She fucking K'd him. He wanted to laugh. It was why they made such great friends, all those years ago, even before technology made them old and uncool. She was the only person who could give it to him as good as he got. While all the Losers weren't afraid to call him on his shit, she knew when he needed a taste of his own, annoying medicine.

The only person, maybe, besides --

A car behind him honked. Shit, how long had the light been green? He pulled forward and jabbed at Bev's name, calling her before he could chicken out.

Ring.

Richie looked at the clock. It was just after 10 p.m. Was that too late to call?

Ring.

He flicked to a different station, one less upbeat, before deciding he really wasn't interested in listening to the radio at all, actually. He snapped it off.

Rin--

"Richie?" Bev's voice washed over him. A feeling he didn't even know was lodged in his gut unraveled.

"Hey little lady," he purred, "what's up with you?"

She laughed, but an undercurrent in her voice let Richie know she was annoyed. Which was fair, considering. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"I am sorry, you know. Things just got --,"

“Busy?”

Richie hummed. As he drove, he filled her in on the last few days: How the show was going, stupid set stories he technically was contractually obligated not to be saying, things that annoyed him. It hit him then how much he missed talking to people -- which was weird considering that talking to people, seeing people, was what his job entailed.

But there was a connection here, a mutual feeling of love and affection, that he couldn't quite get from castmates. Once he found Beverly again, he couldn't get enough of it. He somewhat envied Ben for being able to see her every day.

Only somewhat, though.

In return, she talked about restarting her company, about wrestling back control of it from Tom, and what she planned to do once the lawsuit and dissolution of Rogan & Marsh occurred. He'd seen the tabloids, as much as he tried to do them, and Tom was doing his utmost to try and portray Bev as off her rocker and not good for the company.

She had been toying with the idea of going public about the abuse. On the one hand, it could help to make her claims that she had a right to half the company stronger. She was the artistic powerhouse, after all, while Tom did the marketing and made the connections. It wasn't like they didn't have the evidence. One of the few friends Bev had after the Losers, Kay, even kept records of when Bev came to her with a black eye or a mysterious limp.

At the same time, she didn't want to let the public in, didn't think they had a right to know. Richie's heart pulled at the thought. Though their situations weren't the same, not even in the slightest, he could empathize about the spotlight -- about other people thinking they had the right, the privilege, to know what went on behind closed doors.

Without coming forward, she reasoned, it would make her case harder to prove that she didn't have a breakdown, leave in the middle of the night and run off with another man on the other side of

the country. Her actions made her look flighty, impulsive -- not a look shareholders were interested in. But it would keep her privacy her business and, furthermore, not drag Ben's name into it.

On the other hand, if she stayed silent, Tom could do this again to another woman. To many women, potentially. She just couldn't bare the thought it.

When Richie asked her what she planned to do, her voice faltered.

"I don't... I don't know," she said, voice tinny through the faltering connection. He was home now, sitting in the tower garage of his apartment complex. Though the service was poor through the layers of concrete, Richie didn't feel like making the trek all the way upstairs yet.

Beverly sighed. "I guess that's why I wanted to talk to you. You help me think straight."

"First time anyone's ever told me that."

"What?"

"Nothing." Richie snorted. "Just don't usually see myself as a bastion for rational thinking, you know?"

Especially not recently, he thought. He closed his eyes and asked Bev to talk him through her pros and cons of doing either idea. As she talked, his head dipped. He forced himself upright but overcompensated and smacked his head against the driver-side window. Shit.

The car was too warm. He was falling asleep, and he couldn't --

"Richie?"

"Huh?"

"You made a weird noise." He heard her fumble with something that made a popping noise, not unlike a wine bottle being uncorked. "Are you okay, hun?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face and groaned. "Honestly? Just really tired. They've been running me like a dog, Bevvie."

Pulling the keys from the ignition, he gathered the few notes he took from set and rolled them into one, easier to carry bundle. He shivered getting out of the car. Even with it being California, it was still December. And even with him growing up in Maine, knowing the hells of nor'easters and freak blizzards, he had spent too long in the sun and somehow lost all his ability to temperature regulate.

He did, however, get a big pay bump out of it so -- you win some you lose some, he supposed. Richie made his way towards the elevator, which brought him from the garage to his floor with a swipe of a keyfob.

"I know you can't really tell me about it, but do you at least like the project?"

"I better. I fucking co-wrote it."

The noise Beverly made Richie pull the phone back from his ear. "YOU WHAT!"

"Fuck," he said, "I mean, uh --,"

"RICHARD WENTWORTH TOZIER WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US!"

"Oh my god, please don't use my middle name, you know I fucking hate --,"

In the background, he can hear Ben cautiously ask if everything is okay.

"No! No, shut up, oh my god." She made another noise that sounded too girlish to be coming from a 40-year-old woman. There's fumbling, then a door shutting. "Oh my god? Oh my god! You wrote this thing? Richie that's HUGE!"

"Well, I mean...", The elevator dinged and he stepped out. "Yeah I guess."

"You guess?"

"I did," he amended. "I did write it. It is kinda a big deal. Especially for someone like me."

"Someone like you?"

"Like... not quite big, but getting there, you know?"

She giggled, admonishing him for being so disparaging. Richie found himself almost getting a second-wind off her energy.

"Why didn't you tell us? I mean, we knew you got cast in the show but why didn't you say anything about writing it?"

"I didn't want to jinx it," He said, surprised by the honesty in his voice. He balanced the phone on his shoulder with his ear and unlocked the front door. "This is like, one of the first big things I'm putting my name on. Like, for real. Using my own words to tell my own story. This story. You get it. I didn't want to tell people it was cool and then get cancelled after one season."

"I get it," said Beverly. "But now you can rub it in Eddie's face that you do write your own material."

-- concrete, rocks, solid behind his head and under his back and holy CHRIST the world was spinning. Was he going to puke? Probably.

A burp.

(Definitely.)

"Hey! Richie! Listen, I think I got It, man! I did it! I killed it for real, I --"

-- Warm, wet, sticky, shock, hurt, bright --

What the fuck was going on? What the FUCK was going on?

Richie's stomach rolled and he only had seconds to throw himself in front of the sink before he vomited. His phone clattered against the granite countertop. The notes he was holding fluttered to the ground, one almost threatening to fall into his sick before he batted it out of the air. Faintly, he heard Bev's muffled, panicked voice repeating his name.

Shit .

Well *that* hadn't happened before. Not while he was awake.

Richie coughed. The smell of stomach acid filled his nose, almost making him retch again. He stared at the mess in the sink and the small amount of food he had managed to force down his throat between readings stared right back at him.

Grabbing for his phone, he turned on the faucet and watched it slip down the drain. Well, so much for that.

"-chie? *Richie* ?"

"Yeah, I'm here, Red," he croaked. God, did his throat burn. It's a good thing he never wanted to pick up singing, or this could be the end for him. The grim thought meant to force a laugh but instead a burp came out. "Sorry about that."

"Richie what the fuck? Are you OK?"

He wiped the left over spit from the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand. *Water* , he thought. He needed water.

"Yeah just, bad food on set today, I guess. Wasn't feeling so hot after lunch," he lied, fishing a glass out of the cupboard. "Jesus, didn't think it'd come out like that though."

"Shit."

"Yeah." He filled up the glass, swished the water around his mouth

and spit it out again. “Honestly, that’s how I thought it would make its exit too.”

“Disgusting,” groaned Beverly, “beep beep.”

He filled up the glass again, this time drinking it all down before leaving it in the sink.

“Just, take it easy, okay Rich?” She said after a pause. “We’ve been worried about you recently.”

“We?”

He made a face even though she couldn’t see it. Despite the fact that he always kept his apartment at a pretty even temperature, goosebumps broke out across his arms.

“All of us. Me and Ben, but the others too.”

“I talk to you like every day, Bev, what the fuck are you worried about? The fuck are literally *any* of you worried about? I’m peachy-fuckin-keen, jellybean.”

“Richie--,”

“Look, is it about missing last month’s Skype sesh? I told you, I was just tired.”

“You seem to always be tired. And if you’re getting sick --,”

“Holy shit, paging Sonia Kaspbrak.”

“Jesus, Rich, calm down, I’m just --,”

“--listen you --,”

They both stopped then. Only breathing sounded over the line. Richie took a large breath, held it in, then pushed it out slowly through his mouth. The one good thing about them being friends was each always seemed to know when the other needed pushing. The one bad thing about them being friends was, due to their similarities, the other always knew where to push the hardest and where it was the

most effective.

After a minute, Richie started talking. "I'm sorry, okay? You're right. I am always tired. I've never really been involved with something like this and it's really stressing me out which I guess is getting me sick too. But that's no reason to treat you like a dick, Bevvie-boo."

"You're right." She sniffed. "It's not."

"I know."

"I just... We care about you, Richie. Remember that. All your accomplishments, they're great. They're wonderful. But they're only wonderful if you're healthy and happy enough to appreciate them."

Were she in front of him now, there was no doubt in Richie's mind he would have hugged Bev. Instead, he asked her what self help book she read that out of and told her plagiarism was a misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in prison and or \$50,000. She told him to fuck off right back.

As the conversation naturally wound down, Richie found himself then thinking of Stan. He had been doing that often enough, recently. Were they there for each other more, like they were back then, would he still be here? A gruesome question to ask, but one to think about nonetheless.

(Because he knew he lied, back in Derry, when he said Stan was the weakest willed of them all.)

While thinking about this, Bev bid him goodnight and asked if he'd be interested in making the trek out to her and Ben's place for dinner sometime soon. He might have agreed. Honestly, he couldn't remember.

"I'll let you know about Christmas, though," he said before hanging up the phone.

Before going to bed, he took a double dose of NyQuil PM, set an alarm on his phone, and fell into a dreamless sleep. But before he did that, he downed a finger or two of whisky for good measure.

Ok, he thought to himself as the room began to spin, maybe that was more than a finger .

He didn't dream that night.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Some filler, but some set up. We're getting there people!

Something was up with Richie and god *damn* it was Beverly going to get to the bottom of it.

It had started with the phone calls.

After remembering each other, the two had become inseparable, almost as much as she and Ben had become. What was between Richie and her compared to her and Ben, however, was nowhere near the same thing. She knew both men understood that too on some level, even if nothing was ever said aloud.

Upon taking the same flight home, they realized they didn't live all that far from one another. He had offered her his couch upon learning about Tom and the fight to get her things back. Then when Ben decided to relocate from Nebraska to California, calling it a business venture (which they both really recognized was more of a business-pleasure venture, truly) Richie had helped her move right into his place, no questions asked.

He was everywhere -- a part of Beverly's life she couldn't believe she had lost for 27 years. It was like suddenly, she had regained use of a lung and could breathe again, fully, deeply, with Richie at her side. He didn't expect anything of her and in return she didn't expect anything around him. Together, they were the truest, most unguarded forms of themselves and each thrived on the simplicity of things.

Then, just as sudden as the almost-daily phone calls had started, they stopped.

She couldn't really pinpoint when or why. One day she had opened her messages to respond to a text from her assistant when she realized, a few names down from that, there was Richie's. Its subject

field said the last message had been sent nearly a week ago. It wasn't a particularly memorable note either, just: >**what's cookin good lookin?**< that she had, for whatever reason, never responded to.

It was probably because the message had been sent at 2 a.m.

Between her maintaining a public face -- being forced to see Tom almost constantly in mandatory board meetings -- and trying to sort out whatever was going on between her and Ben (not stressful in the slightest, more like stress relieving, honestly) it had just slipped her mind. That was one of the perils of being an adult, she supposed. The more you moved, the more tired you became and the more life slipped away from you.

She had also been learning to cope with surviving Derry, which, she was sure, they all were doing in their own little way. Talking through everything with Ben had been therapeutic, to say nothing of it. Their folie-a-deux Pennywise fuckery had taken them to another level. There was something about near death experiences, taken from your most traumatic nightmares, that could really bind two people together -- and really fuck them up as well.

Beverly still dreamed of drowning in her own menstrual blood. Ben had told her that sometimes, when he woke up, he could taste dirt in his throat even if there was no nightmare. Bill called every now and again, to talk about Georgie, but he had more or less come to terms with things over the years and his trauma had faded from a festering wound to a dulled, peach colored scar on his soul.

The dreams though, they were growing fainter. When she asked Mike about it, he told her that it was probably due to It's fading power. They had beaten It, loosened It's hold on their hearts and minds -- and while physically It wouldn't come back to haunt them, mentally it would take some time. She guessed that it wouldn't quite take a therapist to figure that out, but appreciated the advice nonetheless.

The only thing she couldn't shake, hadn't figured out, was Richie with the arcade token.

In the moment, she assumed it was something to do with childhood. All their tokens had been, for one reason or another: Georgie's boat,

Eddie's placebos, Ben's poem to her, her signature to Ben, Mike's rock, Stan's shower cap -- they were moments of triumph and brightness over an otherwise lackluster and abuse ridden childhood. But she couldn't figure out the arcade token. And the one time she did garner the courage to ask, Richie had paused for a moment, then carried on like he had bad reception before changing the subject.

A knock on her office door broke her from the spell of her thoughts. Beverly looked up to see her receptionist standing in the doorway.

"There's a man here with lunch for you. Says his name is Ben Hanscom?"

Her lips curled into a smile. "Send him in."

Ben greeted her with a kiss, moments later, and a bag of food from a bistro down the way. It wasn't uncommon for him to bring her food, especially on the days he didn't have prior meetings, but usually he would call. For him to surprise her like that, she supposed it meant he had something to say that he didn't want to call over.

Or he was just being spontaneously nice because people did that.

(From time to time she was forced to remind herself that, sometimes, people in healthy relationships did things for their lover without any type of favors -- sexual or otherwise -- attached. From time to time she was also forced to remember what a fucker Tom was.)

Beverly pulled a warm quinoa salad, topped with tofu, out of the bag and handed it to Ben.

"Your gross health food, good sir."

He rolled his eyes. "It's not gross."

"I dunno." She pulled out a grilled cheese and tomato soup for herself. "Just doesn't taste like anything to me. Tastes like... dirt. And water."

"You just gotta cook it right. It's all about the seasoning."

She laughed and called him a snob. He laughed right back at her

when a slice of tofu he flicked in retaliation went right down the gap of her shirt and bra, leaving a splatter of teriyaki sauce on her chest.

As they ate, they talked about their day. It was horribly boring and Bev found herself in love with every second of it. There was something just so... intimate about doing absolutely nothing at all. In the middle of both a bite and a thought, Ben suddenly waved his hands with wide eyes. She thought, for a moment, he was choking and made a motion to thump him on the back.

He shook her off with a “no” motion.

“I almost forgot to tell you,” he said, washing down his bite with a sip of Diet Coke. “Bill called last night.”

With a mouth full of food, Bev raised her eyebrows as if to say: “When?”

“You were on the phone with Richie in the other room and I didn’t want to bother you. He started messaging me through G-Chat when he saw I was online and called my cell when I said you were busy.”

She swallowed, and made a noise for Ben to continue, then took another bite.

“Brought up this really cool idea, actually,” he started to laugh. “Wanted to throw a Losers Family Christmas party.”

“Oh my god, yes!”

“Gross. Chew your food.”

She stuck out her tongue and showed him a mash of bread and cheese. Rolling his eyes, Ben continued: “I didn’t say yes yet because I wanted to double check it with you, but I figured you *would* want to say yes, so I basically... said yes.”

“How succinct.”

“Anyways, he said he wanted to ask us first because he wanted to know if they should rent rooms somewhere because, and he brought up a good point -- we don’t have enough space for everyone at our

place. I mean, I guess we could squeeze if we pulled out the aerobed and bought some sleeping bags, but...," he trailed off.

This was true, she supposed. Their apartment had three bedrooms, despite having money-enough for more. One room served as their shared studio and was stocked full of a few mannequins, a large drawing desk and a stand-up computer desk for Ben to work at while Beverly sketched. There had been no room for a bed, and they liked it that way.

The other room was a joint storage-library room, where a small daybed had been pushed into a corner for guests too drunk to leave should they come over. It wasn't often they did have visitors, but the bed was big enough for one and one only. Considering they had four grown men, maybe some significant others? There was no way they would all fit.

A large L-Shaped couch in the living room could fit two. Bill and Audra, she supposed. Mike could take the daybed in the reading room. Richie lived in the area, abouts, so it wasn't like he couldn't just Uber home. Would they be able to fit Eddie and Myra on the blowup? From what she had heard about Eddie's wife, just from the short period they had all been together in Derry, she didn't sound like the most... accommodating of women. And when the group had met her at the hospital, well --

Bev's face pinched into a frown.

"What do you suppose we do, then," she asked.

He laid out exactly what Bev had come up with, moments before. When it came to Eddie, he pointed out that the man could simply stay with Richie.

"But what about Eddie's wife?"

"Ok, so, I don't think I'm supposed to be telling you this yet --,"

-- but you're going to anyways --"

"BUT," Ben paused for dramatic effect, "Eddie filed for divorce, apparently."

Bev clapped her hands over her open mouth and squealed. “Are you *shitting* me?”

“Not even a little bit,” said Ben.

He told her then what Bill had told him the previous night: That apparently a few days after Eddie came back from Derry, hole in his face from Bower’s knife and a chunk of skin torn out of his shoulder from where It’s tenta-claw nearly skewered him, he told Myra in the middle of dinner that he wanted to separate. There was no preamble, no couching it, just Eddie remarking in between bites of how tasty the lamb was that, oh yeah, by the way, I think we should see other people.

“Did he say why?” Bev prompted.

Ben told her then too, which Eddie apparently didn’t tell Bill but that Bill surmised well enough, that it was because of whatever Eddie saw when he faced It while looking for their tokens. That apparently, Eddie saw his mom, saw Myra as his mom, and it was enough to scare him right out of New York. Or, rather, not right out. Apparently he was still in the city but living in his own apartment instead of the townhouse.

Ben shrugged as he cleaned off their meal scraps from her desk, separating them between the recycling and trash bins. “I guess he just... realized it wasn’t something he wanted, you know?”

She could understand. Going back to Derry made them all realize things and, in turn, made them stronger people. More whole. More healed. Coming back and facing their demons after so many years of living shoulder to shoulder with them had almost de-aged her, making her feel like a little girl again; she knew Ben and Bill felt much the same.

“Good for him,” she said at last, and briefly, thought of her own leave from Tom. They were both fighters, it seemed, she and Eddie. “It didn’t feel...”

“Right?”

The light caught Ben's face and illuminated his sculpted cheekbones. He had a peculiar look on her face that she thought she understood, but didn't ask about.

"Yeah," she said instead, "It didn't feel right."

"Speaking of right -- did Rich say anything about he and Eddie fighting?"

"What?" Now that, certainly, she didn't understand. "What are you talking about?"

Ben laid it out as Bill had voyeuristically presented it — from Eddie working himself into a self-doubting frenzy over having, theoretically, done something to piss Richie off to Bill wondering if there was something between Richie and Eddie that their friend wasn't quite being truthful to Bill about.

The thought exhausted her. It was like they were children again playing a game of telephone, only instead of the message going in "*I like balloons*" and coming out "*where are my sandals*" it seemed the wires got crossed and Eddie was hearing "*I think you're annoying and I, specifically, hate you.*"

"So weird," Bev murmured.

"I'd say. They were basically attached at the hip when in Derry." Ben leaned against her door frame, signaling he was leaving soon. "Kinda like we were."

Her face grew hot. *Eddie... and Richie?* Stranger things had happened. Hell, *Obergefell* was decided last year.

"You don't think...?"

Ben raised an eyebrow. "Them? Eddie was married to a woman."

"He married his mother, Ben. We all know that."

He at least had the good sense to make a sickened face.

She hummed. "I think the only people who would know that though

are them.” Bev stood, walked around her desk and joined him at the door. Placing one hand on his belt and the other on the door handle, she leaned into Ben to whisper: “And I think that you, unless you leave right now, are going to miss your four o’clock.”

“Why, Ms. Marsh, are you implying something?” With the two of them chest to chest, she could feel Ben’s baritone rumble.

“Maybe...” Bev purred. Then she twisted the door handle, laughing as he stumbled back into the hallway. Ben barely caught himself from hip-checking the USPS runner as the old man sidestepped out of his way. “And what I’m implying is — get back to work, slacker.”

“I’m wounded, Beverly,” Ben said, cheeks pink. “Is that what you think of me?”

“I think you’re a wonderful person for bringing me lunch!”

He groaned. “I think you’re a scammer, Bev.”

“Just finding that out now?”

“Ugh.”

“Good bye , Benjamin!” Bev gave a slow princess wave. “Drive carefully now. Oh — and text me when you get there!”

He moved like he really was leaving, then turned back just as suddenly to bum rush a kiss to her cheek, dashing away just as quickly before she could register it.

Boys, she thought, turning back to her office. She pressed a hand to her cheek and felt full. *More trouble than they’re worth.*

The rest of the day for Beverly passed in a blur between meetings, fittings and working with her personal assistant to plan out January

through March of the following year. By the time she had a moment to breath, it was already nearing 6:30 p.m. with an hour's drive home still, considering traffic.

Her phone was a firm weight in her back pocket. She had weighed calling Richie to ask about Eddie, but something made her think better of it. When she had mentioned his name last night to him, Richie had promptly thrown up. It was like there was some Pavlovian response to it that she didn't...

Something was there. Whether Ben was right and it was romantic or Eddie wasn't being neurotic and it really was some sort of grudge, she felt obligated to get to the bottom of it. Because god damn it -- she had sat through awkward, drunken Christmases before, when the best gift was to be bruise free for a few days. She would not be subjected to that in her own house.

Well, her and Ben's apartment.

(Semantics, she thought.)

Maybe she would have more luck calling Eddie, instead. Or, a third thought crossed her mind, maybe she shouldn't be meddling between them at all. She as valid in her concern for Richie being a space cadet, throwing up over the phone, spacing out and ignoring her, but if the two of them were interested in each other -- god this really was middle school all over again, except this time, no clowns.

Rather than fully immerse herself, she sent Richie a text later, asking about if he had plans for Christmas and if not -- would he like to come over to the first annual Losers Family Christmas Extravaganza? She erased the message twice before sending it to make sure it had the perfect amount of sarcasm and emojis.

It wouldn't be until she was falling asleep later that night, thinking things people only do when they're on the cusp between reality and beyond, that her heart would thud-lurch suddenly as she'd realize: When had she told Richie about Christmas?

She hadn't told Richie when he called yesterday. He had told her. He had said he'd let her know. He had said... before Ben, before Bill called... *while* Bill called?

Bev pulled her phone off the bedside table, turning the brightness down so it wouldn't wake Ben. Sure enough, there was no response, no indication that Richie had even seen the message. She put the phone back but neglected to plug it in.

It was physically impossible. His and Bill's calls would have occurred at the same time. She didn't even learn about it until lunch today... unless Bill called Rich first? But then why would Ben tell her that Bill wanted to run the idea by them before calling everyone else?

Beverly started drifting again when her head hit the pillow.

She thought about Stan in the bathtub: The writing on the wall, the glassy look in his eyes, the syrupy puddle of blood on the lip of the tub. A constellation of goosebumps broke out across naked her arms and made her nipples pebble.

Beverly considered waking Ben up to ask, to put her mind at ease, but didn't. Her limbs were too sleep heavy and she was so far away. Instead she stewed in her own head and wondered: What the hell was going on with Richie Tozier?

(That night, she would dream about being in the Deadlights, all those years ago and the feeling of existential terror it wrought; she would dream about being suspended in the air, caught in a spider's web, and being unable to break free; she would dream about her friends dying in various horrible ways and none of them coming true -- except one; she would dream about seeing Richie in the Deadlights, stumbling past her like he was looking for something, only he was older, more frazzled, and they were fated to pass each other like ships in the night anyways; she would dream about the feeling of sobbing so hard her body shook.

She would not remember a thing upon waking up.)

5. Chapter 5

He blows off the Skype session but texts Beverly back confirming the Christmas party on the 20th. That gives him just over a week to nut up before seeing Edward fucking Kaspbrak in the flesh -- since Derry -- and, all things considered, he's anticipating for it to go well.

It only took six shots to work his courage up to admitting that maybe him staying with Richie wouldn't be such a bad thing. Nothing like liquid courage to light the fire of manhood, or some other shit thing he'd read at an audition once.

Who was he kidding. The moment Bill called to run it past him, Richie had all but plead to take Mike in rather than Eddie, who he offered up "the comfiest bed in SoCal" aka Bev's reading room bed. Bill had sounded less than impressed and asked what his deal was. Richie stammered out something about being needed back on set and hung up. Life moved on.

But really, it was a lie (no shit). He both did, and didn't, know what his deal was.

There were the dreams, he knew that. He knew that really anyone seeing him have a freak out in the middle of the night wouldn't be pretty. Regardless of if it were Eddie or Mike or even Bill and Audra: trying to explain to anyone why he's puking at 2:30 in the morning then again at 5 a.m. and no, no he's not bulimic that's genuinely nothing to joke about (rich, coming from him, he knew) it was just too intrusive. Too personal.

The only way to make it stop was to drink, and when he drank, he said things. Not necessarily bad or raunchy, just things Sober Richie would never say and he'd like to keep it that way.

Then there was the whole... *thing* about being around Eddie, too, that he wasn't quite comfortable admitting, even to himself. He just knew that his heart beat a little differently -- more like the intro bass drum to that one Motley Crüe song that seemed to be in every fucking car commercial -- whenever the other guy was around in a way it hadn't in 27 years.

And who was to say that Eddie felt even remotely the same way? Sure they had reconnected at Derry the first night but when he found out Eddie was married it was like a knuckle punch straight to the spiritual scrote; he was floundering for air in front of everyone but only just managed to save emotional face by constructing himself a verbal parachute in the form of a joke at Sonia Kaspbrak's expense, that horrible bitch.

After that, yeah sure, Eddie had been there when Richie dug an axe deep into Henry Bower's fucking potatoesque skull with a solid thwack and a splatter of vomit. But to any decent human being's credit, anyone would be emotionally supportive in the wake of having to watch a childhood friend come to terms with now knowing what it was like to kill a man.

Eddie had rubbed his back and gave him napkins while he spit out the sick up and until the adrenaline wore off and Eddie almost passed out himself from blood loss. It was around that same time too Richie noticed a hunk of skin hanging off his friend's face like peeled baloney, which prompted another round of vomiting and Ben loudly remarking why they could never just have an easy fucking time when hanging out as if they were the Magic School Bus gang and he was Arnold.

Looking back, his one liner was both accurate and, oddly, hysterical.

Then there was the cave and he was absolutely not touching that memory with a ten foot pole, oh no. That went locked in the mental box along with all of Richard W. Tozier's ghosts and horrible experiences, never to be thought of again and killed furiously with alcohol like the rest of his body -- kind of like he was doing now.

From his place on the couch, laying on his back with his hands on either hip bone, the room didn't spin as bad as it did when he was right-side up. He could work with this. Sure, it was only 3:15 according to his cable box but it was a Tuesday now and nope... nope actually that line of reasoning didn't make it any better, just made him sound like a drunk.

Which, *technically*, he was. In this moment. Just like he promised himself earlier last week, only, he didn't quite make it to Thursday,

he supposed..

It's OK Tozier, he thought to himself with a giggle, you can stop at any time, can't ya?

Just as soon as the dreams did. The last one had been about Stan, funnily enough; about how his disembodied spider-head had skittered across the floor to make out with him in a horrible slobber of fangs and claws.

And Eddie was cowering in the corner.

And Bill was standing over him, yelling at Richie to fight it.

And Richie was laying there thinking: *I really left LA for this ? I could have died in a crack house back home, easy peasy.*

His phone buzzed on the coffee table, two quick bursts to remind him of the text he was so dutifully trying to ignore. He knew if he flipped it right side up there would be at least two texts from Bev and one from Eddie. Maybe there was one from Ben now, too, since the phone would have stopped buzzing at this point and oh... wait --

It was a call.

Muscle memory acted faster than his brain could process and he picked it up, slurring a hello into the phone.

“Are you *drunk*? In the middle of the afternoon? On a *weekday*? ”

“On my computer?” Richie quipped. “It’s more likely than you think.”

“Oh my god, you are drunk.” Bill put on a good exasperated tone but it wasn’t anything compared to Eddie’s incessant, well-meaning nagging. “What the fuck are you even talking about?”

“Woe to the fact that William Denbrough is so unhip, he doesn’t even know what memes are.”

“I do too!” He sounded genuinely offended. “Also, how the fuck are you drunk? Don’t you have a job?”

“Don’t you? Or did your publisher finally realize they’ve been killin’ trees for nothin’?”

“Better than killin’ brain cells like you do, asshole.”

This was fun. This was easy. This was --

“So you’re gonna tell me why you’ve been dodging us recently, right?”

-- *unfucking* unbelievable. And not that he really expected any of them to let it go, that’s not who they were, but in all fairness the Richie they knew wasn’t really who he was anymore either. People changed. They grew up. They learned to deal with life through different vices and virtues and all the fuckin’ Bible verses in between, or whatever got them through the nights.

“Right, Rich?”

He groaned some version of *oh my god* right back at Bill. Sure he could have been less of a dick about things, sure he could have made some better attempt at communicating with the other Losers about why he was busy or why he was -- well, maybe not that. He couldn’t talk about the dreams. And he especially couldn’t talk about ---

“I just think that --,”

“I know I’ve been a dick,” Richie cut him off. “I know I’ve been a real flake and I’m sorry. I just --,” the rest of his sentence was lost in a sigh.

There was a time when talking to Big Bill Denbrough was the most calming feeling in the world. Sometimes it would just be the two of them, uncommon but not rare, in the clubhouse. Sometimes there would be ice creams or sodas. Other times there would be tears and screamed words. Bill had always been the strongest of them all but there was always something Richie knew he had that would wear away his armor.

And Bill, somehow, always saw right back through Richie’s humor, lanced like an arrow right in Achilles’ heel from yards away. Decades apart that hadn’t really changed, even if Richie’s armor had grown

rusty and difficult to take off.

The other end was quiet until Bill said, "Talk to me, Richie."

Half truth? Whole truth? Nothing but the truth?

Richie thought of them at 12 years old, sitting in Georgie's bedroom just weeks after his body was found, going through the little boy's picture book Bill's mother had gotten for George's fourth birthday. He thought about Bill weeping in Richie's arms after that fucking clown convinced them the book was spitting up blood and all the guilt his friend held for years and years after that.

"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever's got you fucked in the head right now, I guess."

"Oh, man," Richie laughed. "You want the long or the short version on that one?"

Bill chuckled. "Yeah I suppose that's a fair reaction, for any of us, really. But I'm serious, you know."

"So am I?"

"The long version then: as unplain and unsimple as you've got it."

"I'm pretty sure neither of those are actual words in the dictionary."

"And I'm pretty sure you're stalling, but that's not deterring me none."

"God, all these years outta Derry and you still talk like a fuckin' hick."

" *Richie .* "

He rubbed the back of his neck, even though he knew Bill wouldn't see it. "Yeah, yeah." He went to sigh but it came out as a hiccup. His chest tightened. "I just --,"

Go ahead Richie, tell 'em all about the crazy dreams you've been having

and the fact you can apparently see the future now , said a voice in his head not unlike Pennywise's. *Maybe then they'll finally take pity on you and send you to the nut house, just like they did with dear old Bowers .*

And then he thought, *that doesn't even make any sense.*

And then he thought, *wow, maybe I did drink a little too much.*

"I told you about the show I'm shooting, right?" He said instead, because, hey, it was better than nothing. "About the, the thing with HBO and --"

"Yeah. The comedy?"

"It's... not really a comedy. Well I mean it is but, like, comedy-drama, you know?"

"I'm aware that those are a thing, yes."

Richie ran a hand over his mouth. "I think it's getting to me?"

"Is that a statement or a question?"

"Both? Neither? I dunno man, I --," This time he did sigh. He realized he'd been doing it a lot recently.

"Well, what's getting to you?" He had an image of Bill, in his mind, sitting in a leather chair bound on mahogany wood, leaning back with a pipe in his mouth (Did he smoke? Honestly, it didn't matter.) taking diligent notes like the therapist he had anointed himself as. The thought almost made Richie laugh. "The pressure or the deadlines?"

He guessed if anyone understood pressure, deadlines and getting lost in your head creatively, it was Bill.

"You ever make a character and it's just... too real?"

Silence. He could see Bill, in his mind's eye, with pursed lips and a furrowed brow wondering what the fuck Richie was drunkenly babbling about.

Ohhhh boyyy why did I ask that?

Why did you ask that --

WHY DID YOU

“One of my first books,” he started after a minute, then stopped. Bill cleared his throat and tried again. “One of my first books, two of the characters were based off what happened. You know, with me and --,”

“Georgie,” Richie finished.

“Yeah.”

The conversation lulled again. Richie wanted nothing more than to hang up. Christ, things were never this awkward when they were kids. Someone -- Bill, usually -- always knew what to say and when to say it. Now they had grown old and gnarled, or at least their souls had, and there was always something lurking just underneath which could lead to some emotional minefield going off.

Worst part was, with 27 years between them, Richie wasn't even sure what that could be now: not for Bev or Mike or Bill or Ben or even Eddie.

“Is that what's bothering you?” Bill said at last. “Your project? Can you talk about it?”

Richie snorted. “As long as you don't narc on me, I guess, since I did draw up and sign my own NDA and all. So I'll know if it's you!”

“I get it,” Bill laughed. “I do.”

“I'm not kidding, they'll slap me with a big ass fuckin' fine and probably kick my dick to the curb.”

“Just the dick?”

“Eh, it's the only part of me that's worth anything anyways, Billy Boy. Least, that's what Audra said.”

“Christ on a Cracker, Rich -- some things really don’t change, do they?”

But they did, didn’t they? And that was the point. Couldn’t stop it any more than you could keep the sea from eroding the rocks or the sun from slowly dying out, leaving behind a world that would inevitably go cold and black. Whoever said the more things change, the more they stay the same was an idiot, thought Rich, because the more things change the more things moved apart, never to come back again.

Bill’s voice, asking about the show, brought him back.

“You okay? You just kinda went quiet there for a sec.”

“Tired,” Richie said.

“It’s like noon.”

“Where you’re at, maybe. And again, fuck you man, it’s my day off.”

“I guess so.” Bill said. He prompted Richie again about the show. In response, his stomach rolled and Richie froze. Last thing he needed was to puke on the phone with another Loser. At least this time though, he could reasonably blame it on the alcohol.

When the nausea passed, Richie threw a hand over his eyes. Placing the call on speakerphone, he set it on his chest and started talking before he could stop himself.

“It’s about this assassin guy, right?”

“Okay.”

“And like, he’s not a bad dude, but he’s not a good dude either. Used to be in the shit in Afghanistan, came back, and realized he had nothing. No one. Didn’t really know what to do but was fucked over by PTSD because... well, I -- I can’t spoil everything, you know?” Bill laughed but told him he understood and continued him on. “Anyways he’s like in this funk of take a hit, go home, go to bed. Take a hit, go home, play some video games, go to bed. Not really a life, but it’s his life.”

"Sounds kinda like a junkie, when you say takes a hit."

Richie nodded. He took the hand off his eyes and found the room wasn't spinning quite so bad anymore.

"I guess you could say that," Richie said. "Yeah, he's kinda like, addicted to this life. But it's killing him. Like a guy hooked on smack -- he needs it, but it's killing him."

"Who the fuck says 'smack,' Rich?"

"Me, now shut up. You asked me to tell you about the show, so I'm telling ya' Billiam."

"Right, right. Go on."

"So he takes a job, and while following his mark, he stumbles into an acting class. Like he literally gets roped into this class and he wants nothing more than to get the fuck out of dodge because it's scary, being exposed like this, and he's a dude who's used to living his life in the shadows, right?"

"You said this was a comedy?"

"Comedy-drama. Anyways, he gets pulled into this world, meets these people, and he thought he'd hate it, thought he'd go running for the hills... but he likes it. He likes the attention and he likes the people he's met and they're like his family. They pull him out of his shell. And maybe, yeah, they've all got problems -- 'specially the girl he's in love with, jeeze is she something -- but who doesn't have problems, am I right?"

"And the more he hangs out with these people, the more he realizes: he doesn't want his old life. He doesn't want his single bedroom apartment or his microwave dinners. And, yeah, it's bringing him in a lot of money -- but he doesn't want any of that being when he's back in his old life... he's not... human."

"Richie...," Bill's voice had a rasp to it that Richie couldn't quite identify, but it didn't matter. He felt manic now, like the words had to come out -- like they were being physically pushed out.

"The old way, it's no way to live. The old way means being what other people wanted him to be. This new guy -- this better, more confident guy -- *this* is who he wanted to be. This is who he was supposed to be. He can be himself. Or this version of himself he always dreamed of being, if it wasn't for all the fucked up shit going on in his head. But his old life keeps trying to drag him back. Make him into something he's not, something he never was.

"He was only that way because they made him that way. Because it's better for them. Easier. And now, he's forced to try and reckon with his choices and the two different worlds -- he can't live in them at once. No one could. And he knows, he has to make a choice. But it's scary, it's really scary for him, Bill, because --," his throat closed up, invisible hand pressing down on his voice box in a vice grip. Richie's mouth opened and closed. It opened and closed again. Not even a squeak came out.

"Because what?"

Richie thought then of Mike. He thought about getting the call then googling the Derry child murders, so wanting so badly to be proven wrong and see that it wasn't back again. Only one of the first return searches he was greeted with for a gay-basing against two kids named Don and Adrian.

One of them didn't make it, paper said.

Couldn't even find his body.

"Why's it scary, Rich?"

"Because..." But why was it scary? Everyone else made it look so easy, especially in L.A. But he had blurred the lines between work and life and now it was time to reel it back in. "Because he doesn't know what he's doing. And neither do I."

"What do you mean?"

What did he mean? He knew. He knew, he just... "I've never written something like this before, never played a role like this before. So what if I mess it up?"

“You *wrote* this?”

Richie rolled his eyes. “Why does everyone act so shocked? Yes . I mean, I had help with like a writers room and stuff, and I’m getting a co-writing credit since it wasn’t totally my idea, but --,”

“Wow, that’s,” Bill blew out a breath on the other line. “Man that’s huge. Fuckin’ deep. Congrats.”

The tone pulled a smile onto Richie’s lips. “Thanks. I’m just --,”

“Nervous?”

“Figured you’d know best about putting yourself out there, since, you know, you write and all.”

“It’s the worst.” Bill’s voice was firm and Richie had to laugh. “No, really, listen: it’s the fucking pits. You think you’re gonna shit your guts out because that’s you out there, even if people don’t know it. So if they hate it, they hate you.”

Christ. Yeah, that was it.

“Tell me how you really feel,” Richie said instead.

He sat up and took the phone off speaker, suddenly felt more sober than he had just moments ago. Bill’s words were ice water and his tone was the electric shock. Time to wake up, Rich.

If they hate it, they hate you.

Blood rushed in his ears.

They’ll hate you .

Tears pricked at Richie’s eyes. He snorted once, hard, and swallowed them down.

“But listen, Richie, you --,”

“Oh, shit.”

“Rich?”

“Fuck I totally forgot about a --,” he fumbled with the phone, with a lie, before landing on, “I forgot I was supposed to be in for a refitting. Shit. Had to leave like 20 minutes ago.”

“I thought you said this was your day off?”

“No one really gets a day off in Cali, Bill,” he said, standing. The lance of nerves he felt in his chest had spread from his heart to his lungs to his stomach. For a second, he thought he just might shit himself. “Anyways, sorry for talking your ear off. I’ll give you a call later, you can return the favor, ‘kay?”

“Listen, Rich, before you go. About Christmas --,”

Christmas.

Losers.

Eddie .

Impulsively, he hung up on Bill. The phone switched back to his home screen, a photo of the Playboy logo. He wanted nothing more than to throw the whole damn thing off his balcony. Maybe, he’d even throw himself too.

No.

No, that wasn’t a road he was going to go down.

Instead, he held the home button long enough for it to prompt him to shut it off. He did.

There really was no reason for anyone to want to get ahold of him for the rest of today. Even he got days off, whether his brain wanted it or not. And the only way to do that, he’d found recently was... his stomach lurched at the thought of more alcohol.

OK , Richie compromised, thinking of the lunch meat in his fridge, food first . Then another drink. Just one more .

He padded off to the kitchen, phone out of sight, out of mind. If he kept it up, everything else would be out of mind too. Whiskey, vodka

-- whatever else was in his cabinet, well. It had a funny way of doing that, he supposed.

6. Chapter 6

"So we agree something is very much up with Richie, right," Bev said to the three of them -- Eddie, Bill and Mike -- in lieu of a hello. Ben sat just to her left, nursing a beer, but still on camera.

"I've heard some things from Bill," Mike started, looking uncertain, "But I don't really know --,"

Bill cut him off. "Why are we gossiping about him behind his back?"

"It's not gossip if we're trying to find a way to help him," said Eddie. "Besides, if any of you called him right now, would he even pick up?"

"I talked to him like a day or so ago," Bill said.

"We haven't heard from him since last week," said Ben, Bev nodding along.

"I can't even remember the last time I physically heard his voice." Mike's video feed was grainy, but Eddie could see him picking up his phone and scrolling through what he assumed was his texts. "Call log says just after Derry, but we've texted a couple times since then. And whenever the last time we all Skyped was."

"Eddie?" Bev prompted. "What about you?"

Eddie pursed his lips. There was still a text sitting unanswered on his phone, an innocuous one about the Christmas party. *Bastard*, he thought. His long pause gave Bev enough of an answer that she continued as if he had spoken with: "So we're all in agreement then? Something is up."

"I guess..." Mike said after a minute. Eddie didn't peg him as convinced.

"When we talked the other day, he sounded... really frazzled." Bill ran his hands through his hair a few times, but each time his long

bangs flopped back down over his forehead. Randomly, Eddie thought to tell him that if he kept doing that, he'd go bald, but then thought better of it. "Not gonna lie, it was kinda scary."

"What, like, kill yourself scary?"

"*Eddie !*" Bev sounded scandalized. It was an honest question.

Bill shook his head. "No, no more like someone on the brink of a breakdown."

It was possible. Richie was a relatively popular comedian with a fairly decent following. Hell, Eddie knew of him before he had even remembered they were childhood best friends, and that really said something since he knew he essentially lived under a proverbial rock thanks to years under Myra's thumb. She had hated Rich's material, thinking it crass and crude -- which it was, genuinely -- and banned him from watching it around her.

But somehow, for some reason, Eddie had decided one night while she was sleeping that his small act of rebellion against her would be to binge some of his work on Netflix. One special turned into a few episodes of a show Richie had guest starred in, which then turned into press junkets posted to YouTube -- and before he knew it, he had seen almost everything he could get his hands on without having to pay for it.

Maybe he had always known they were connected. Maybe even when his brain didn't realize he and Richie had always known each other, his heart did. He repressed the urge to gag at the saccharine thought.

Get a grip , Eddie thought to himself. It's not even like Richie would --

No. No that wasn't a thought he was going to go down.

But Richie had seemed so happy in everything Eddie saw him in. And, yeah, he knew that obviously that didn't mean Richie wasn't depressed or stressed out or anything else but it just seemed so... unfathomable. He couldn't reconcile the image of the man who made jokes about fucking his mother and took shots by physically putting the whole glass in his mouth and spitting it out with someone on the

verge of a mental breakdown.

Or maybe he could. There was certainly a moment in Derry where it seemed like the mask had slipped away and Eddie caught a glimpse of a Richie that had been forged through nearly three decades of California solitude: one that seemed more weathered and world-weary, like he was ready to collapse and sleep for several decades, just like Pennywise. Maybe the signs were there all along, just none of them were in the right mindset to notice them.

To their credit, there was the whole saving the world from an intergalactic, child-eating clown thing going on, Eddie thought to himself. They did very much have other things on their plates. So lost in his thoughts, Eddie didn't realize Ben was repeatedly saying his name until he was nearly yelling it.

"Jesus, you don't have to scream," he said, sheepish. He had no idea what they had even been speaking about and hoped it wasn't anything he didn't already know.

Ben chuckled. "You with us now? You just zoned out."

"Sorry." He scratched at his neck. "Just... thinking."

"Anything you'd like to share with the class?" Bev asked.

"My guesses are as good as yours, probably," said Eddie. "Maybe even less than, since he won't actually pick up the phone and talk to me, for whatever stupid reason."

Bill made a face, which Eddie immediately picked up on, barking out an accusatory "What?"

"Are you guys fighting?"

"What the fuck?" Eddie was floored. "What makes you think that I --,"

"No, no listen it's not," Bill huffed, gathered his thoughts and tried again. "Can you think of anything, *anything* at all, that would, hypothetically, make Richie get mad at you for? Even if you were totally in the right?"

"No!" Eddie yelled. "He's the one that's been dodging *my* calls!"

"He has?" Ben sounded confused, and Mike chimed in an equally curious: "That doesn't sound like him. Or, it seems out of character, at the very least."

Bill continued, undeterred. "You've been trying to talk to him?"

"Yeah, I mean... we've all been trying to talk to each other, right?" Eddie felt the pit of his stomach drop out. Was Rich not responding because he found him annoying? *Twenty-seven years is a long time*, he thought again, *long enough to become a whole new person*.

Bev was quick to reassure him that he wasn't the only one. It was like pulling teeth to get Richie to pick up his phone, she said. The only real trump card she and Ben had was the fact they lived relatively in the area and could threaten to drop in at anytime for their own version of a welfare check. And when he finally did return her messages, he apparently vomited while on the phone.

Eddie's nose crinkled. "Maybe he's sick?"

"He said it was food poisoning," Bev said.

"Maybe he's just not over it yet," said Bill. "I mean, he was drinking when I was on the phone with him. Maybe he hasn't given himself enough time to recover?"

He tried again. "No like, what if he's like, *really* sick and isn't saying anything?" No one said anything so Eddie rolled his eyes and spelled it out: "You know, like cancer?"

"Oh my god," said Ben, exasperated. "Don't joke about something like that."

"What makes you think I'm joking, asshat?"

"Eddie, c'mon," Bev said. "I feel like that's a bit extreme to jump to."

"Oh I'm sorry," he huffed. "Demonic child eating clowns are believable and killable and real but cancer is out of bounds, got it, my bad."

“Don’t be like that,” said Bill.

“Be like what? Realistic?”

“Pessimistic,” he shot back. “Maybe Richie’s like... depressed or something. I mean how is that less believable than fucking cancer?”

“Because he smoked like *all the time* when we were kids?” Eddie felt like he was speaking another language. What weren’t they getting? “So like... how is lung cancer --,”

“If you forget, I was right there smoking with him too,” Bev cut in. “So if he was sick, I’d probably be no better off. Still am probably no better off, honestly.”

“Ok, but statistically --,”

“Statistically,” Ben said louder, “shut up. Please, Eddie.”

They had a point, Eddie conceded, but it didn’t stop him from mumbling back “doesn’t even make sense as a comeback” before shutting his mouth when Ben shot him a stern look. It was almost cute how much more protective Ben had become of Beverly since coming back from Derry, Eddie thought, but only *almost* since PDA was disgusting and that was something he was never going to budge from -- not even for his best friends.

“Fine,” he said after a minute. “What do you bozos think then?”

“I have been thinking about it actually,” Bev reached off screen and came back with a mug of something steaming. “Namely because I can empathize.”

“Well?” Mike said.

“Yeah don’t k-keep us in suspense,” said Bill.

“He’s hurting because he can’t readjust back to like how it was before.”

The sincerity of her tone, coupled with her words, punched Eddie out like a one-two combo. It didn’t look like he was the only one. On

screen, Bill recoiled and Mike's brows furrowed as he frowned. *How it was before* ? He couldn't understand why anyone would want to go back to how it was before. Mike could leave, Bill got his closure, Bev and Ben got together, Eddie woke up to the fact that his life was a sham, and Richie --

Richie got...

Richie, he got...

Absolutely nothing came to mind. Eddie's stomach sank. Richie had gone to Derry, killed a man, relived whatever trauma he had to deal with because of It and then was sent packing. He tried to think back to just before they had left, tried to remember what Richie looked like, but there was only an empty space. Nothing stuck out. Nothing felt out of the ordinary.

Maybe he had seemed quiet, which Eddie could have chalked up to being tired at the time. Maybe he had seemed reserved, but Eddie just assumed it was realizing the reason why none of them could remember each other was because of some cosmic higher power. Hell, maybe he was exhausted because of the realization there *was* some cosmic higher power and instead of it being Jesus Christ it was the devil incarnate, who came to eat babies.

"Jeeze, Bev," Bill blew out a breath. "That's... an idea."

"No, listen. I'm telling you: I don't think he's ready to come to grips with it being over." Bev's hand kept patting the side of the mug, too warm for her to hold it properly, Eddie assumed. The rhythmic pat-pat-patting of it was distracting. "I mean, haven't for the last few decades you've just felt... on edge?"

Well of course he had. On edge was basically Eddie's middle name. He had never assumed the other Losers felt the same way. Yet he felt strangely comforted as the others, save Mike who no doubt was unaffected by it due to never leaving Derry, nodded along with her.

"But now--,"

Ben interrupted her. "We don't."

She nodded.

“That still doesn’t answer the question of how we get him out of this funk,” Eddie said. “Or what that has to do with ignoring me, specifically.”

“Did he tell you anything before we left?” Asked Bill. “You were the last to see him.”

He thought back, thought hard, to the last conversation he had in the flesh with Richie. And he thought.

And he thought —

“— that I don’t think I’ll ever be able to walk past a fucking sewer grate in my life, I swear to god,” Eddie fired various toiletries -- and why the fuck did he bring so many anyways? -- into a smaller zipper pouch which he then rifled into a bigger suitcase. “And can you imagine how fucking hard that’ll be? In New York? I may as well move to the god-damned Adirondacks and become a hermit.”

Richie stood in the suite’s doorway, leaning up against the jamb. He promised Eddie a ride to the airport since Eddie hadn’t the forethought to rent a car and didn’t want to spend the money now if Richie was offering. His whole body looked bone tired, like he wanted to drop and die, but he insisted he could drive and to Eddie that was good enough.

There had been a few days since Neibolt, and now, with nothing left to stay for, it was time to go home. Sure, they were battered and bruised, but it was nothing sleep wouldn’t fix. And a long-ass shower. Maybe several, considering Eddie could still taste greywater in the back of his throat when he sniffed too hard.

But now, it was time for goodbyes. Or rather, the last goodbye to be said,

since Bill had left earlier that morning, taking Mike along with him for what he called 'mandatory Hanlon vacation time.' They were followed shortly by Bev and Ben who elected to rent a car and drive cross-country which... good for them, Eddie supposed. They deserved it after all this. Hell, they all deserved a vacation.

Now it was just he and Richie, and even soon, that too would be over. They'd go back their separate ways and hopefully meet again under better circumstances. Richie would go home to, what Eddie assumed, was his nice L.A. apartment and the girlfriend he always talked about in his specials -- or maybe it was a new girl by now, seeing as though Richie's flirtatious nature hadn't changed in the 27 years since they last met. And Eddie... he'd go home to --

He suddenly stopped packing.

Myra.

God, she was the last person he wanted to see right now. A shiver ran down his spine as he thought of the basement of Center Street Drug Store and how his mother was strapped to the table and left to the wiles of the leper -- a mother who looked a hell of a lot like his wife, in hindsight. He felt pity, too. She didn't deserve what he was inevitably going to have to say to her, but then again, he didn't deserve to live like he was either.

Sometimes life just sucked and was painful, Eddie mused, even when neither person was particularly in the wrong. He had proposed all those years ago, after all. While he felt forced, it's not like anyone had a gun to his head. Nothing was making him marry Myra except his own rubber backbone and the feeling that he'd really make her feel bad after having lead her on for all those years.

Richie's voice spurred him back into action. "I don't want to miss our flights just because you spent like thirty-million years packing up your ninety pounds of beauty shit."

He had fucked off to somewhere, claiming he wanted to see the town one last time so his nightmares knew what it looked like, but he was back now.

"Oh, well forgive me for wanting to be prepared, asshole," Eddie said, but there was no heat in his words. Maybe Richie was right. Did he actually

need any of this shit? He felt he was only 12 again, and Mr. Keene had told him his medicines were placebos. But then he grew up and forgot He fell right back into the same trap.

He broke the cycle once. How hard would it be to do it again? Eddie shut suitcase -- all the clothes he cared about were in it anyways, the other two only contained back up medications and extra travel clothes he really had no attachment to -- and only picked up the full, family-sized one.

He turned to face Richie, who was toying with the strap of his duffle bag and playing on his phone. When he felt Eddie's eyes on him, he looked up.

"Ready to go?" Richie asked. "Need help with your shit?"

Eddie breathed out a sigh. "No, actually." For having been stabbed in the face by his childhood bully and confronting the fact he was Freud's wet dream of a case study, he was surprisingly zen. "I'm only taking the one. Turns out I might have over-packed and uh, brought some baggage."

Richie snorted and shook his head, mumbling out something that sounded like something about getting off a good one. "I think we all did, dude. You ain't special."

"Har, har. Aren't you a regular fuckin' comedian?"

"Yeah, man, turns out they just let anyone tell jokes on stage nowadays. Can you imagine?"

They made their way downstairs and out to Richie's rental, suitcase banging on every other step. Eddie had to awkwardly sit with Richie's bag in his lap as his own suitcase took up much of the nonexistent behind-the-seat space. The whole time the radio played softly, fluttering in and out of soft pop music and a horribly insensitive Christian talk show.

Richie doesn't say anything on their nearly two-hour long drive into Bangor and it gave Eddie the creeps. When he tries to start a conversation, it's shut down almost immediately through non-answer grunts and soft chuckles. The only time he said anything was to admonish Eddie for trying to turn the Christian channel as it ranted on about the dangers of vaccinating children, joking with him that it was "just getting to the good part."

As the signs for Bangor International came more frequently on the road, the mood got worse. Eddie couldn't place why. He just knew in his bones, in his gut, something was wrong. When he looked over at Rich, there was something in his eyes that looked both incredibly frightened but desperately relieved. It almost looked as though he might cry -- though there were no lines around his mouth to suggest he was holding back a sob, no wobble to his jaw.

Something warm bloomed in Eddie's stomach as the sun kissed the sides of Richie's face. He couldn't help but stare at the gangly kid who had turned into a windswept man with a sharp jaw and tired eyes.

When had he become this person?

Richie caught him looking and asked if there was something on his face. Eddie told him to focus back on the road, since more crashes statistically occurred due to distracted driving than did airplanes malfunction and fall out of the sky. It felt right for a moment, felt them, and then it didn't again.

He didn't want this to be the last time he saw Richie.

"Do you think we'll forget?" Eddie asked, before realizing he said it out loud. "Do you think when we go back home, we'll --,"

"I fucking hope so," Richie's voice was low but firm. He sounded venomous, which took Eddie by surprise. Sure, this wasn't a fucking picnic by any stretch of the word, but they had remembered each other again and that had to count for something... right?

He must have noticed Eddie's pinched frown because he amended himself with: "I don't mean you guys I just mean... there's shit about this place that I didn't mind I forgot about, you know?"

Eddie thought about Bowers stabbing him in the face and the leper from his childhood offering to suck him off and knew Richie was right. Unless they all went through some intense therapy, there'd definitely be nights he'd wake up in a screaming fit and that was just a fact. But it wasn't like he could just tell a psychologist about his time in Derry in the same, neat little package he could wrap his mommy issues up in.

"I never did thank you for saving my life, you know?" Eddie said as they pulled into the dropoff area so Richie could return their rental. He moved to give Richie his bag so he could exit the car. "Back in the cave? I... For a second, I really thought --,"

Richie threw the door open and promptly vomited on the sidewalk, the splattering reverb almost making Eddie sick in turn. He hissed out a curse and threw himself out of the car. By the time he made it around to Richie's door, he was already wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Are you alright?" He went to steady Richie, but met with nothing but air as he pulled back like Eddie was going to burn him.

"Don't touch me," he rasped. Eddie's stomach swooped, a frozen feeling hitting him just above his belly button. "I think," Richie burped. "I think I legit might have gotten shitwater in my mouth and have E.Coli now. Holy fuck. I may or may not be dying."

"We didn't murder that clown fucker just so you can keel over at the airport."

Richie waved him away and Eddie gave him space. His long legs unfurled from the car and he was able to clear his own sick no problem, all while mumbling something about how dying in an airport beat dying anywhere in Derry any day. The next several minutes were spent trying to get Eddie's bulky luggage from the back and hand off the keys to an attendant that eyed Richie like he wanted to ask if the man was drunk.

To the kid's credit, Eddie supposed while tonguing at the pucker of the stab wound on his cheek, they both looked a little unhinged. He wondered, then, if he should go and get his mouth looked at by a real specialist since the only thing they had done was visit the Derry Urgent Care and lord knew when the last time those people actually received medical training.

And then, they were both standing before the ticket check.

People whirled around them going about their day. They cried as they saw off loved ones. They huffed as they pulled things out of overstuffed bags, desperate to meet the weight limit. They groaned out of hunger or boredom or annoyance or any of the other myriad things airports caused people to groan over.

"So, this is it, huh," Eddie said. His ticket was a straight shot to New York but Richie needed a connector from Philadelphia to Los Angeles.

"I guess so, Eds."

"Don't...," he didn't have the heart to finish telling him off, instead saying: "Don't forget about me, OK?"

Richie settled a hand on Eddie's shoulder. If he wasn't wearing his jacket, Richie's thumb would have settled on the dip of his clavicle. Eddie tried not to think too hard about that. He really did.

"I couldn't forget you," Richie's voice sounded thick now, "even if I tried, Eddie."

"You did before."

"Not because I wanted to."

The clock in Eddie's peripherals told him if he didn't leave now, he'd really be shit out of luck. Would it be so bad to miss his flight, though? He thought then of work and of bills and of Myra and, fuck--

"Call me," Eddie said. "Write me."

"What is this, Little House on the Prairie? Fucking write you? Am I supposed to do it by candlelight, too?"

"Text me then. Just don't --,"

"Forget." Though Richie's body was here, his eyes told Eddie he was somewhere else. He just wished he knew where. "Yeah, no." He came back, then. "I won't. I couldn't, Spagheds."

Eddie couldn't bring himself to complain about the name as Richie clapped him again, twice, on the shoulder. He gave Eddie a push toward the gates, told him to "get to gettin'." And Eddie did, feet moving on autopilot toward the Delta sign.

He chanced a look back over his shoulder but Richie had already dissolved into the crowd.

It was like he was never even there to begin with.

In the end, they decided to table the conversation for another night and come back to it. Naturally, being them, the talk had dissolved from talking about Richie to talking about Bev's new designs to talking about Eddie's pending divorce finalization.

The call had dwindled from six to five to four to two -- until it was just Bev and Eddie left, as Ben had announced he was wandering off to bed so as to be presentable for a meeting in the morning. Bev, too, was bidding her goodnights to Eddie when he stopped her.

"Can I ask you a question," he said, then reflexively added, "And not the one I just asked you."

"Shoot," she said through a poorly stifled yawn.

"When you... before we all remembered, before we came back to Derry, you said you dreamed about us dying." He watched as Beverly's mouth twisted into a deep frown. "Do you think that all Deadlight dreams are that... horrible? Do you even think all Deadlight shit makes you dream fucked up stuff?"

"I mean, we don't really have case studies to go off of," she said. "Unless Mike does? Why are you --,"

"Do you think Richie saw something?"

He was only kind of kidding, in his own weird, fucked up way, when he joked about Richie having cancer earlier that night. Truly, this was what was on the forefront of his mind -- that no one else seemed to remember, or actually consider, except him.

And now, judging by the look of realization on her face, he might not be the only one.

“My dreams stopped after we killed It though,” Beverly said after a long pause. “I don’t think --,”

Eddie cut her off. “But you do remember, don’t you?”

She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and closed her eyes. Were this a cartoon, he might have even heard her audibly gulp. When she pulled it away, her mouth was pressed into a firm line but her eyes gleamed.

“I probably won’t ever forget.”

“So what if it’s like that, you know?” He whispered, like the thought was too much to say with his regular voice. “What if he saw something and he didn’t... and he just...,”

But Eddie didn’t know what else to say. He just stared off at his apartment, like the dim lighting of his kitchen had any of the answers. Maybe the hose attached to the sink would sprout a mouth and tell him how to fix his life and friendships. It looked like Bev was doing the same as him, just thousands of miles apart.

They could have sat there for minutes or for hours or for days, but when they logged off and finally called it a night, neither were any closer to solving the mystery of Richie Tozier or the Deadlights or any of the other cosmo-psychological shit that had so thoroughly left them all severely damaged people.

No sooner had he shut the lid of his laptop and crawled into bed did Mike’s cell phone ring. At least, that’s what it felt like.

He blearily reached for it, slapping his hand across his nightstand until he felt it connect with something that was vaguely its same shape. The book he had fallen asleep reading tumbled off his thigh to

the floor.

“H’llo?”

“Oh my god, it’s like 2 a.m. there, isn’t it?” Bev’s whispered filtered through the line. “I didn’t even think about --,”

“Waz’wrong?” Mike asked, brain wanting to say things his mouth wasn’t quite awake enough for. “You okay? Everyone okay?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” She cut in. “Nothing that wasn’t wrong before you went to bed, Mikey. God, I -- I’m really sorry for waking you up.”

It took a second for him to catch up. *Richie* . They must have stayed up later than he did, further discussing things. He forced himself upright and rubbed at his eyes. Well, if Bev was calling then there was probably a development.

“This is about Rich?”

Bev didn’t respond, but he could hear her breathing on the other line. Talking about Derry sometimes did that to them. It punched the wind out of their bodies and replaced it with fear, filling their bodies in a way that felt just like dry land drowning. Sometimes it took a minute to gather their thoughts. Other times, even months apart from the place they grew up, it was almost impossible to push out what they wanted to say even if the others had lived it too.

The mind was a funny thing, Mike thought. Humans were, too.

“How much of your research into Chüd had to do with It?” She asked, each word more carefully measured than the last. “You know. It, the creature.”

Mike sat up. He had a feeling he was going to need to get his notes for this.

“I know... well, not much, honestly. It’s old. Older than us, than humanity.” He swallowed his groan as he got out of bed, wondering when he got so old then remembering he was only 40. “It’s a thing that came from a race of creatures, way out in the universe which feed on fear. And what we knew as It, Pennywise, that’s not It’s true

form.”

“I figured as much. Why a clown though?”

“Beats me, I guess. Worked for Gacy,” he nodded to himself, “probably took notes.”

Bev snorted.

“So,” she said after a moment, “What... what is It, then?”

“No one really knows.” Mike made his way into the small spare bedroom he had converted into a personal study. In a fireproof safe, pushed under the writing desk in the corner, were all his notes on Derry and It. He balanced the phone between his shoulder and ear as he opened it. “There was some thought that the creature It truly is was beyond human comprehension. That one look at It would destroy you.”

“Very ‘Raiders of the Lost Arc,’ then,” said Bev.

“I was thinking more like the true Biblical angels. Like the ones said to have six wings and dozens of arms and looking at them would cause you to go blind.”

“Scary.”

Mike chuckled. “Well, people really do tend to sanitize the Bible when retelling it. ‘Cept my grandpa, of course.” The safe opened and he pulled out a thick tome of notes, bound in a black three-ring binder, and a manila folder. “Never was one for pulling punches.”

He left the safe ajar and sat down at the desk. *Last time I needed these, I thought we were going to die*, Mike thought then, sullenly. But they didn’t. They were here now, and that’s what mattered. Mike thought then of Stan and closed his eyes. After a breath, he opened them and turned to a random page in the binder.

“So, what is it that you’re trying to get at, Bev?”

“How much do you, do we, know about the Deadlights?”

It wasn't the question he thought she'd ask, but then again, he guessed he really didn't know what she was going to ask anyways. With It dead, he thought he'd never have to look at these god forsaken notes again. In fact, he had almost burned them on his way out of Derry in his own personal self-purifying ritual but had held back at the last second.

Even now, he didn't know why he had hesitated on getting rid of almost three decades of work. Maybe it was a stubborn thing -- he had devoted most of his life to this research, after all -- but a smaller part of his mind knew it was out of self-preservation. What if it came back? What if *more* came back?

What if this was the only comprehensive research on the planet that could save humanity?

Mike shook his head. He was no Flash Gordon. He was no John Stewart. Just Mike Hanlon, the librarian, with fists full of notes that looked straight out of a book co-authored by Lovecraft and Asimov.

"We don't know that much, honestly," he said. "I pieced together a few things but -- well, it's not an exact science."

"Because they're just stories?"

"More or less." He didn't have time to get into the anthropology of Derry's native tribes, nor did he particularly want to at two in the morning. "Basically what we know, and using 'know' as a loose term, the Deadlights are a part of It... but not It itself."

Bev made a noise. "I don't follow."

"Think of It and the Deadlights like... like," he racked his brain for something comparable, "Like an anglerfish! You know, those deep sea fish with lights on their heads?"

"Ok...?"

"Well those lights exist to lure other fish in, mesmerize them, and then when they're least expecting it -- bam!" Mike snapped his fingers. "Anglerfish eats 'em."

"So the Deadlights are like a lure?"

“From what I could gather. Except,” he ran a hand over his face, “it’s a little more complex than that. Because, from what I was also told, is that those Lights also serve as like... a way to tenderize the meat. It feeds on fear, so the Lights show you your worst nightmare. The more scared you get, the more...,”

He didn’t have to go on.

“What happens to people after they’ve been caught in the Lights? Do we know?”

Now that was something he hadn’t really ever thought of, he supposed. Those cases were so few and far between, he hadn’t even bothered to keep note of them and Mike told her as much.

“Me and Richie got away, though,” she said softly, “Bowers, too, I guess... although...,”

“It definitely made him crazy. Or,” Mike huffed a laugh. “Crazier. Lord knows that boy didn’t have the good sense that God gave a goose, but he did have all the venom a rattlesnake could ask for.”

He thumbed through the binder to find the small section he had written about the Deadlights, which was less than a page. Everything he had relayed to Bev was the entirety of what he had written. It was a phenomenon that few lived to tell the tale through -- and if they did, they were Certifiable, with a capital C.

“You and Rich are the only two I’ve heard of who have survived the Lights and didn’t go crazy,” Mike said. “Everyone else I talked to, even if they had family who got away from It, if they saw the Deadlights then that was it. Never the same again.”

He listened, then, to the measured in-out, in-out of Beverly’s breathing.

“Are there side-effects?”

Mike pursed his lips. “I don’t know, truthfully. You’d be the best person to answer that and I think you know it, too.”

She laughed but it sounded hollow and sad.

“What’s this all about?”

“Eddie...,” Bev took a breath and started again. “Eddie thinks that whatever’s wrong with Richie, that it might have something to do with the Deadlights. With being stuck in them. I don’t know if there’s anything there or if Eddie is just being a worry-wart, but --,”

“But you thought you’d ask,” Mike finished for her. “And who better to ask than your own personal Derry Google?”

“You do know everything,” she said with a giggle. “Or, if you don’t --,”

“I at least know where to find it.”

They fell into a comfortable silence which was only broken when Mike let loose a loud yawn. Beverly apologized for keeping him up, but he brushed her off and told her to go on with whatever she felt the need to call about.

“He just seems to be pulling away,” she said, voice small like she was twelve again. “And I don’t know why. Or what caused it. And maybe -- maybe it’s nothing. Maybe he’s just like this and the only reason we didn’t know is because we have this picture of him in our heads from 27 years ago and maybe... maybe that’s not who he is anymore.”

Mike winced. He could sympathize. Each of them had grown into people who were the same as their childhood selves but... just ever so different.

That was just life. It wore you down.

“Look,” Mike flipped the binder shut, “I can’t tell you what’s going on in Richie’s head because I couldn’t tell you that even when we were kids. Really, I don’t think anyone could. The only thing I think we can do now is just be there for him and let him come to you when he’s ready.”

Bev made a noise that was both frustrated, but acquiescing, in tone.

“I know you don’t like that answer, but that might be the only one we have right now.”

“I just don’t know what changed,” she whispered. “He was... well none of us were really ‘fine’ after everything but... It just seems so weird. It just doesn’t seem like him.”

“Well,” Mike stood so he could put his notes away and kicked the safe shut. “We’re trying to square the Richie we knew with the Richie he is. Are you the same Beverly Marsh as you were in 1988? I mean, we caught up a little in Derry, but we didn’t -- we couldn’t -- possibly lay out everything that’s happened to us over the last 30 years or so. And even if we could, would we?”

She said nothing and that was answer enough for Mike.

He flicked out the light in the study. They bid each other goodnight.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for all the feedback! It means so much to me, as I haven't really ever tried writing something this size before. It's gonna ramp up from here on out folks -- thanks for sticking with me. :)

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie tries to stop things from happening, but sometimes, that's just the way she goes.

Casting had given him a haircut and the role called for no glasses, so when Richie looked at himself in the mirror now, he hardly even realized it was him he was staring at. Even now, in the distorted and upside down reflection of his spoon, he'd almost scared himself.

"Looks good, huh?" said his manager, Todd. He'd been harping on Richie to clean up for awhile now, insisting that the grungy look of the 90s comedian had long since faded out of being cool.

It was about tailored suits and well-coordinated outfits now. Good-bye Dane Cook (and honestly, good riddance), hello John Mulaney. Well, wish granted, Richie supposed, running his fingers through his closely cropped hair.

"Just takes some getting used to, I guess," Richie snorted at himself, "Not used to looking like I didn't roll out of bed and through a Goodwill, for once."

The contacts, especially, came on a learning curve. He'd stabbed himself in the eye so many times practicing he thought he'd go blind. Richie had even lost one of them on his bathroom counter, only to find it the next morning shriveled into a little ball.

Todd snorted too. "Best damn thing that's probably rolled through a Goodwill, honestly."

While it wasn't an off day, the two had planned to meet for lunch before Richie got on set around four to prep for shooting a night scene. Sequestered into the corner booth at a nautical themed Mexican restaurant, per Todd's choosing, the two were packed knee-to-knee at what should have passed as more for a coffee table than a booth.

Todd was a good man with the looks of an off-brand Tom Sellek and the personality of Chris Farley, party aptitude and attitude included. It was really his only downside, Richie thought, as the man was always trying to get too chummy for his liking.

Richie wanted a guy who would manage his scripts and tours, not be his friend, but he supposed if the first requirement was met then the second one could begrudgingly be tacked on as well. He was probably the first and only person Richie had ever met that made him sorry for all the people who had to put up with his motormouth as a kid.

Everything garnered a comment from Todd, good or bad, and his brain-to-mouth filter was nearly non-existent except for when it came to money. Then he became a goddamn shark. Richie only knew because he had seen it first hand when it came to his own representation contract through Todd's firm. But now that row of dazzlingly white, Hollywood perfect teeth kept glinting from a mouth moving so fast under a salt-and-pepper mustache Richie was having trouble keeping up.

He loved it.

The conversation was utterly pointless and completely refreshing to Richie, whose phone had been burning a hole in his pocket with two texts from Eddie dated yesterday.

> Hey, can we talk? <

> Dude fuck you I really need to figure out when to book a flight <

It was equal parts funny and pants-shittingly terrifying, if Richie was honest, having to be confronted with Eddie again. Since Derry, they had kept in touch a little, but nothing outside the realm of the other Losers, and he really didn't mean for it to happen that way it was just... *easier* .

Because if there were others around, Richie knew he wouldn't slip up. And after seeing Eddie again, after being suplexed with nearly three decades of repressed feelings for his best friend (who has a

fucking wife, asshole), after nearly watching him die, he couldn't trust himself not to be a fool.

If there was anything Richie Tozier was in spades, it was a god damned fool.

The waitress came by and they put in their orders, Richie randomly selecting the first thing with beef and cheese in its name. Hopefully it was good. But if it had beef smothered in cheese and wrapped in some type of bread, it was bound to be anyways. Law of nature, or some shit.

Richie took a sip of his comically huge margarita, giving Todd a nod to go on about whatever it was he was going on about. He thought a moment ago he heard the word orange, or maybe it was orangutan, but what did it matter? Todd talked because he liked talking. Richie listened because he knew if he wasn't doing this, he'd be in bed still, trying not to fall asleep while contemplating blowing his brains out.

The dreams hadn't gotten any better since Derry, and really, neither had he. He was jumping at things less, which he supposed was a step in the right direction, but steps only counted when they were strides and not tiptoes. The first night home his fridge beeped, signaling that its water filter needed to be changed, and Richie hit the deck like there was an IED about to blow right in his living room.

What if you open it and Stan's head is there again ? He couldn't chance it.

Richie didn't move for the next hour, only peeking out from behind his couch when his knees had grown numb and his bladder pressed on his stomach with the need to relieve itself. Later that same week, when he found a spider in his tub, he screamed so loud the neighbor knocked on his door to make sure he wasn't being murdered.

Then there was that time a cafe opened down the street from his apartment and its grand opening featured bright red balloons, which knocked the wind out of him and nearly got him mowed down by an UberEats cyclist.

And the time a car commercial featured a clown and ended with

Richie's foot through his television.

And on Halloween where, even with L.A. being a big city, he spent the entire day locked in his bedroom with a switchblade on his bedside table and his Netflix playing reruns of John Hughes movies. Those, he at least knew, didn't have clowns or mummies or lepers or the sentient head of your dead childhood best friend in them.

Yeah, he was getting better.

Or just not... worse.

Which was better, right?

If it wasn't for the dreams, he could have adjusted. It was like soldiers coming back from war, Richie figured. The jumping, the freaking out — it would stop with time. (It had to.)

Only there was never a time the troops fought a space alien, unless Independence Day was actually a biopic and he'd somehow missed the memo. And unlike the trauma that soldiers shared, which could be understood by therapists, at least on some level, there was no way he could talk about a killer clown from outer space unless he was referencing the shitty film — and even then he'd still sound crazy because that shit was an actual piece of garbage.

The waitress came back with a plate of chips and three different colored salsas. Todd dug in while Rich watched. With a mouthful of salsa, Todd asked about the show to which Richie gave some nondescript but positive answer which was about as much as he could emotionally handle for the moment.

He'd gotten in four consecutive hours of sleep last night, a personal best for the last two weeks. It was only the —

— *hard rock of the cavern floor, digging into his back as he lay on the floor, staring up at Eddie spitting blood like so many years ago, right in this very house, right on this very street —*

(“I made him small....”)

*— feel of It’s clawed arm in his hands, the sick **snap** it made as he ripped it from a socket, consumed with the thought of **kill It, Kill It, KILL THIS FUCKING CLOWN** —*

(“Richie... honey, he’s dead.”)

— act of being restrained, Ben and Mike and Bill all using their strength to hold him back from running into the collapsing house because how the FUCK could they leave Eddie? He was scared of the dark. Eddie had never liked being alone because the only time he was alone he was stuck with his mother, stuck in his oppressive little Stepford house. Now, they just left his body, alone, rotting with the rest of the sewer garbage. Think of the germs! Think of how he’d freak if he knew —

(“Richie. I have something to tell you.”)

— fact he now knew that a dead body felt like latex Halloween masks left

in the freezer for too long, and didn't smell much better than that, though that might have been the cistern's shit-stench. He wasn't sure —

("Rich! I -- I think I got it, man!")

— knowledge that blood was warm when it came from fresh wounds and it was so, so hard to get off glass.

A shiver ripped through his body, making him spasm in his seat. Todd kept talking. Richie pulled his coat tighter and made a comment about the A/C in the building being on in December.

So he wasn't getting better.

He was just getting to the end of his rope.

The purple under his eyes was getting harder to mask with concealer and the lines on his face were becoming more pronounced. He still vomited, but it wasn't every nightmare, and that was okay with him. His throat deserved a break. The last time he'd gone into wardrobe they'd ribbed him for having to size down his jeans again -- the second time since the start of September -- and he figured the culprit was probably his habitual horking.

He googled bulimia support websites last week and found the best thing to do to save his teeth's enamel was to gargle with baking soda rather than brush his teeth. Last thing he needed was for a molar to fall out during shooting, have TMZ snap a photo and "report" he was a fucking meth head or something.

The less attention drawn to it — to him, to his problems — the better. Because thought came to him last night while covered in sweat and trembling like a Whippet: even if someone were to confront him on this he wouldn't know what to say. And even if he could say it without judgement -- who would he say it to?

He couldn't tell a therapist.

Couldn't tell a shrink.

Or he could, if he wanted to end up shoved into Gateways and face on the front page of the Hollywood Enquirer, which honestly, if they gave him the good shit, might not actually be that bad a deal.

The only people who would get it was the gang.

But they all had their own shit. They all went through their own trials and had their own bullshit to work through. The last thing they needed was Richie to do what he did best and throw even more shit into the fire, stoking the flames and adding stress to everyone else's life. So he would do what he did best: Work with it.

Improvise.

Because Bev had Ben and Mike had Bill and, shit -- even Eddie had Myra in some way, and that was still better than nothing. But Richie? Richie had a potted rubber jade tree he dubbed Phillip, which he bought from World Cost Market. It wasn't even real. He could hardly take care of himself — taking care of something living, even a plant, was out of the question.

And he supposed he had Todd, too, but really Richie only had Todd so long as Todd had all those zeroes tacked on to the end of his paycheck. Richie has Todd so long as Richie was marketable. But he could work with that. He could channel it into something else, another project or character and -- fuck -- it worked fine for his sexuality. Why wouldn't it work now?

He knew why it wouldn't but much like Richie had foolery in spades, he also had stubbornness and an innate fear of letting people in.

When the food came, Todd finally popped the question Richie had

been dreading.

“So,” he swallowed, then started again, “what the fuck is up with you?”

Maybe he could play it dumb. “What are you talking about?”

“You look like you haven’t slept in fuckin weeks. You out doin’ blow?”

Or maybe not.

“Who are you to talk, buddy? You go on a bender one time -- *once!* -- when you’re 25, and suddenly any time—,”

“Rich.” Todd leveled him with a look that eerily reminded Richie of the same stare his father would level at he and his sister when their fighting had escalated past the point of annoyance. “Rich, I’m not just asking as your manager—,”

“— I know, I *know* —,”

“— but as your friend.”

“As my friend,” he repeated back, the words feeling as fake as the cheese on his wet burrito looked. Damn. Should have gotten the taco salad then.

At least you couldn’t pass off shredded cheese for gross-ass, boxed Velveeta , Richie thought, then almost laughed at how snobby he sounded -- like Velveeta mac n’ cheese with diced hotdogs in it hadn’t been a Tozier family dinnertime special.

He must have made a face because Todd didn’t drop his capital-L Look.

“I’m being serious,” he said, pulling some napkins from the dispenser. He dotted his mouth, three times on each side, then drug it once from left to right across his bottom lip. “Richie, there’s no nice way to say this: you look like shit.”

“Don’t I always?”

"Don't try and funny guy your way out of this, kiddo." Todd balled up the napkin and threw it in his empty soda. Richie's nose crinkled. Todd knew how much he hated being patronized. "This have anything to do with when you fucked off to Maine a couple weeks back? Jay told me about that."

Little rat, thought Richie, remembering how the head of his tour at the time had watched him puke in the alley after his phone call with Mike and slam a Xanax-whiskey cocktail. Jay should have kept his mouth shut. It was just nerves. That's all it was with Richie, usually. Nerves. Everyone in the biz had their own issues and everyone in the biz knew to mind their own.

And that's what it was now -- just nerves.

Just nerves.

"Jay's nosey," Richie said. "I'm just really nervous about the HBO thing, you know? First time I've got my face and my name attached to something this big and I don't want it to flop and be burned at the stake. So sue me if I'm not sleeping as well at night."

He stabbed at his food with the twine of his fork and watched as a splodge of beef and refried beans trickled out of the wound. His stomach rolled.

"And besides," he set the fork down. "The character calls for a dude who's kinda at wits end so Philip Seymour Hoffman better watch his fuckin back! We got a new king of method acting on our hands."

"Phil's been dead for two years, Rich."

"Daniel Day Lewis then, I dunno," Richie shrugged. "Say, why do all the really good actors have three names, huh? Tommy Lee Jones, Jamie Lee Curtis, Billy Bob Thornton -- you think I should start incorporating my middle name into feature roles?"

"Not with a fuckin middle name like Wentworth."

Richie snorted. "You wound me. It's a good name. Family name."

"Well just promise me if you show up at my door with a bastard child

you've fucked into someone's wife," Richie's stomach dropped sharply, and if his face made any changes, Todd kept talking like he hadn't noticed them, "you'll have the good sense not to name the kid Wentworth in 2016."

"Yeah, yeah," he said softly. He picked back up his fork and shoved a lukewarm bite of food into his mouth because he didn't know what else to do. "No babies."

"Not without marriage first," Todd laughed. "But then again, if you did that, you'd probably ruin your whole bit about Masturbators Anonymous. But, eh, gotta retire jokes at some point, I guess. Trade in that one for a bitch-of-a-wife standup, I suppose."

If his eyes rolled any harder, they'd have fallen out of Richie's head. "Oh my god, that's literally the most unoriginal, shitty --,"

"Easy, Betty Friedan."

Richie found he wasn't hungry anymore. Todd sometimes had that effect. Signaling the waitress for a box and the check, Richie told Todd he had some lines to run before being needed on set later. He let the other man slap him into a one-armed bro-hug when he waved off Todd's attempt to pay the bill.

"You're a good kid, Rich."

"T, I'm fucking 40. Stop calling me kid."

They stepped outside and Richie handed Todd his box as he struggled to zip his jacket. Todd pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened Lyft.

"You'll always be that ratty haired 20-something to me, Rich," he said. "I remember when I first saw you in that fucking dive bar --,"

"Oh my god, let's not get emotional in public now."

"No, really!" He clapped Richie on the shoulder, shaking him like a father congratulating a son on a well-played ball game. "You were amazing. Just had something about you. Had that It Factor."

Richie bit his lip to keep from laughing at the absurd truth to the phrase 'It factor.'

"I suppose," he said instead. Richie pulled his phone out of his pocket to hail a car for himself when he noticed the date.

Saturday, December 15.

His heart started racing. Suddenly, Richie was glad he hadn't eaten much because he would have puked it right up on the pavement. That really would have cooled Todd's jets.

"Hey, uh... It's your anniversary tomorrow, right? With Laura?"

Todd lit up. "Yeah! How'd you know?"

"Think you told me about it a few weeks back," he said through shaking lips. If anyone asked it was the cold. Yeah it was California, but it was still December. "But, uh, got any plans?"

"Gonna take her to that new steakhouse down --,"

"Don't." The vehemence in his voice even shocked Richie.

Todd's mouth pulled into a straight line, brows furrowing.

"The fuck you mean, don't?"

"I just...." Normally so good at lying, Richie's tongue was dead weight in his mouth. If he didn't think of something to say, Todd and Lori would be too. "I heard the food wasn't so good. Gave Jake Gyllenhaal the Hershey squirts, I'm talking just *spraying* --,"

"Rich," Todd pulled a face. "That's fuckin' disgusting. Seriously."

"I know! 'S why I'm telling you not to go, man."

"How do you know so much about Gyllenhaal's bowel movements anyways? You livin in his ass or something?"

I fuckin wish , Richie thought, at the same time he remembered: *If you go tonight, your wife is gonna know what the inside of your fuckin skull*

looks like, right before she keels over herself and dies on the hood of your Escalade.

“I’m just telling you, I don’t think it’s worth it.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket again. *Fuck* . He’d been so preoccupied, he hadn’t even called himself a car. “Like, seriously man, *huuuuge* waste of money.”

“They have like eight Michelin chefs that work there. I think I’ll be fine.”

“I also heard the waitstaff is rude as shit.” He remembered what the inside of the place looked like, but not its name.

“Well then you just don’t ti--,”

“And their alcohol is like, *constantly* , always out.” If he could just remember the name, maybe he could show up and crash the dinner before it happened. Or he could come after, happenstance, and offer them a ride home before --

-- his phone is ringing but fuck is he too tired to care. It goes off, for a second, before it starts back up again.

It’s two in the fucking morning -- who the fuck is calling? Someone better be dying, Richie thinks, or dead.

“What.” He says -- a statement, not a question -- unceremoniously into the receiver. The voice that answers back is tiny and breathy, like someone who’s just barely managing not to freak the fuck out.

“It’s Todd.” Richie recognizes the voice on the other end of the line as Angela, Todd’s secretary. Truthfully, Richie had always thought the two were a little too chummy, but Todd seemed to love his wife. Not that it really mattered nowadays.

“Y’fucking woke me up to talk abou--,”

“There was an accident.”

“This isn’t a dive ba--,”

“Don’t even get me started on their bathrooms, man, because --,”

“Rich!” Todd barked, face coloring with anger. “What the fuck is your problem? Are you high? Are you on drugs?”

“Accident?”

“He was on the phone with me,” she whimpered, “and something hit their car, Rich! I heard it! What if it’s serious? I don’t even know where --” her words die off into this high pitched keen that makes Richie want to kind of kill himself too.

He’s always been bad at consoling other people. Rather than try and sell it to her, he tells Angela to go back to bed and that even if something did happen, she couldn’t do anything about it. Let the cops handle it. If something was wrong -- she makes a horrible noise again and Richie’s quick to amend that everything was probably fine -- then the police would alert the company he worked for who would alert the rest of the staff.

Later that day he gets a call back from his agency. Preliminary investigation suggested Todd ran a red and the other kid, just barely over 21, was on his phone. Later, toxicology would show they were all on something: Laura, Todd and the twerp.

Three closed-casket funerals.

Richie had it on good authority if he opened Todd's casket, he wouldn't find a head.

"I fucking wish I was on drugs, dude," Richie mumbled. He shook his head and tried again. "Seriously though, I'm telling you -- go *anywhere* else. Literally anywhere in the entire state, the entire *world*."

Todd eyed him like he was feral. "Is this a bit?"

"A bit? "

"Yeah, you really trying to get into that whole crazy dude method acting thing? Because I'm telling you--," he cut himself off to look down at the buzzing phone in his hand. Holding up a finger to Richie, he answered it, scanning the downtown for his Lyft. When he spotted the car, he waved it over.

Richie bounced from foot to foot.

"Todd, *please* , I'm just trying to --,"

"Look," Todd stopped him with an open palm to Richie's chest. "I don't know what's been going on with you kid, but you're freaking me out. *Me*. And I managed Charlie Sheen during his whole tiger blood fiasco. I don't know if you're overworking yourself or fuckin snorting blow in the bathroom but listen to me." He put his hands on both of Richie's shoulders and shook him lightly. "You need to calm down, or you're gonna go crazy."

Richie opened his mouth to speak, but Todd shushed him. "Ah, ah, ah -- no. No. I don't wanna hear another word out of your trash mouth unless it's to promise me that you're going to go home and take a

fucking nap before you head out to the studio. Seriously -- you're scaring people. Looks like you haven't slept in months."

If only you knew the half of it , Richie thought.

"I'm only trying to look out for you, kiddo." Todd stepped away so he could pull open the passenger side door and climb in. Before he shut the door, he leveled Richie with one final look. "You got people who care about you, Rich. Remember that."

The car sped off to god knows where. The back of Richie's throat itched for a drink.

Shooting goes well. He doesn't need to try and act like he's fucking losing it because, Todd's right, he really is. This sleeplessness is getting to him. A lot of things are getting to him.

"That was amazing," his scene partner told, as they wrapped for the night. "You really had me. Where'd you learn to monologue like that?"

Guy told Richie he'd win an Emmy if he kept it up.

All Richie really wanted was Ambien. A guy from costuming had given him some earlier yesterday, when he'd heard Richie bitching about not being able to sleep. Said he had leftovers from a previous script and didn't need. Richie was no choosy beggar, that was for certain. Sleep was sleep, and he'd take it where he could get it.

Now, whether it was taking enough to go to sleep for the night or forever -- that was another question. The little Pat Sajak in his brain told him to spin the wheel and it landed on enough to knock him out

for the night. A live studio audience cheered.

Hip hip hooray, live another day.

Before crashing, he turned his phone off and put it in the first drawer of his bedside table. His thoughts ebbed and flowed in and out of his consciousness in the way they typically did before these deep, drug-induced sleeps.

He thought of Eddie's texts.

He thought about how, if things happened like they should, Bill would text the gang Audra was pregnant and they'd pop out a wonderful set of twins by Autumn.

He thought of his sister. Huh, he should call her. It had been a couple years.

The pills kicked in and he thought of absolutely nothing.

Around 2 a.m. his phone registered six missed calls and two voicemails from Angela but Richie snoozed on. In the morning, just after 5 a.m., he'd listen to them. One was a wail then a hang up. The other was what he remembered, even if the script was a little different this time.

"Rich... there's been an accident ."

He doesn't listen to it all the way through. He doesn't need to. He's heard it before, like a lot of things that had been going on recently. And just like before, Richie put his head in his hands, and blew out a breath. It hurt as much the first time as it did the second and third and fourth and

Notes for the Chapter:

I thought about posting this on my usual Wed/Thurs schedule, but with it being Halloween on Thursday, I hope y'all enjoy the present of an extra chapter this week since my writing is a bit ahead of schedule anyways.

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

heads up for use of the f-slur, in passing

No one expected much from him today, which was kind of nice.

Fucked, given the circumstances, but nice.

After waking up from the call he'd hightailed it to the liquor store in the pedway under his building. The man behind the mesh and iron security booth asked him if he had any money before Richie even put his hands around a bottle. Then he told him it was Sunday.

Richie peaked at him from over his Ray-Bans and waved his AmEx, reminding him this was L.A., not Amish Country. The man looked less than impressed -- though his mood brightened considerably about \$110 later.

Now, an open bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon sat nestled between Richie's thighs as he made himself comfortable in bed. It had been Todd's favorite. Richie had always given him shit, called it a girl's drink, but really this shit wasn't so awful. Too bad he'd never be able to tell Todd he was right.

He took a gulp straight from the bottle and grimaced. Too bad it wasn't more easily downable either. If it was, Richie probably wouldn't have been so put off wine in the first place. That, and the inevitable hangover from how sugary it could be. It was always the sugar drinks that got you in the morning.

Richie took a smaller sip. With the wine still in his mouth, he leaned back and tapped the crown of his skull against the top of the headboard, thinking himself a human martini shaker. He swallowed.

Nope. No change in taste. Although, why would it? *It's wine, not vodka stupidass*, he thought to himself.

A woman on the television cried about how her husband was dead on a rerun of Cold Case Files. It sucked to think that by this time next

year, it'd be cancelled. Not that anyone else was aware. She asked the interviewer who could do such a thing, to kill her husband in cold blood?

"Easy," Richie said out loud, thinking of Bowers. His stomach rolled and he couldn't tell if it was because of the breakfast wine or the memory.

Was it even breakfast anymore? The time on his phone said 11:23 a.m. and Richie blew a raspberry.

People drank all the time on Sundays at brunch! Fuck that dude for giving him shit.

It's probably because you look like you've been on a bender , Richie thought, then shook his head. This wasn't a bender. People who went on benders had real problems. They beat their wives and neglected their children. They racked up debt and crashed cars and eventually killed themselves, either by accident or on purpose. They were deadbeats.

Losers.

...Wait.

Okay so maybe it might be a little bender. But it was an appropriately timed sad drinking over the loss of a good work friend bender. It wasn't a problem. It was a respectable bender.

"Respecta-bender," Richie mumbled with a smile. "Who'da thunk?"

Buddy, this is Hollywood, look around, said a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Todd. *Everyone's on fuckin' something. You ain't special.*

He finished the rest of the bottle by the time the credits of the next episode rolled. His stomach felt uncomfortably full. When he burped, it tasted acidic and smelled like the produce section at Whole Foods. Christ, he wanted this shit out of his body.

He was halfway toward working himself up to shove a few fingers down his throat when he remembered the bulimia websites and

reconsidered. Last thing he needed was an eating disorder on top of everything else. Although, he knew, that wasn't really how you developed one anyways. They were psychological, like anxiety or bipolar disorder -- or so the Wikipedia rabbit hole he fell down one night told him.

Reading, Richie found, did wonders to keep from falling asleep. But only when he was able to, of course.

He rolled out of bed. It took a second for the airy feeling in his head to fade. God, what was his life? The funny thing was, he knew what his life was: It was being a 40-year-old sad sack who went to the bottle instead of a therapist and still made dick jokes to hide the fact he wasn't straight. Among other things. Lord knew he had a laundry list which was getting longer by the day.

Making it to the kitchen, Richie rinsed out the wine bottle and shoved it under the sink. He took a minute to splash his own face with water. The cabinets rewarded Richie with a mint chocolate chip Clif Bar for his attempt at hygiene and not much else. His stomach grumbled as if it were annoyed by this fact.

"You and me both, bud," Richie said.

Doordash it was. He patted himself down to see if he'd remembered to slip his phone in his sweats. Nope. Back in the bedroom, then. After turning his sheets inside out, Richie managed to find it hidden under his pillow. What sounded good? Sushi?

He thumbed his phone open and, as he did, wondered what god he had possibly angered in this life or any of his past ones. Because as he made to tap the app, he got a phone call, just then. And apparently his fingers were fat enough or maybe the app was located on the area of the screen where the "call confirm" button was because as he tapped on Doordash icon, his phone went dark.

The name "EDWARD KASPBRAK" -- which Eddie himself put in Richie's phone back in Derry, and Richie never got around to changing it to something stupider -- displayed across the top of his screen now.

Somehow the phone rang and Richie had accepted the call all within the span of seconds.

Fuck him and his want for food, was the takeaway here.

“Hello?” Came a voice, muffled by the distance between Richie’s ear and the speaker. “Richie? Are you there?”

Mother *fucker* . If he looked at his vanity now, hanging on the wall across from him, Richie’s sure he’d see his eyes the size of hubcaps. His mouth opened. Then it closed. Then it opened and closed again.

“Are you gonna fucking say anything dude? Because I can hear you breathing so I know you’re there.”

And before Richie could stop himself, his mouth had already finished the sentence: “Well *that* ’s not creepy at all.”

The call went silent. For a second, Richie thought it dropped. He brought the phone up to his ear as if it were a live taser.

“Eds?”

He’d heard of the phenomena ‘the calm before the storm’ or being in the eye of a hurricane -- how everything became scarily idyllic just before tragedy struck. Well, hell had-th no fury like a Kaspbrak scorn. If there was anything Eddie managed to pick up from his mother, it was that.

Richie heard Eddie breathe in slowly through his nose.

Pause.

Then out through his mouth.

Pause.

And then --

“WE HAVEN’T SPOKEN IN ALMOST TWO *FUCKING* MONTHS AND *THAT’S* THE FIRST *FUCKING* THING YOU SAY TO ME?”

“I --,”

“NO! You listen to ME, dickhead, because I have been calling you and texting you and --,”

And Richie doesn't mean to, honest, but he found himself zoning out then. Being a little drunk and hearing Eddie's voice just sort of... did that. A dopey smile crept onto his face as Eddie called him a “six foot tower of dog shit.” He hadn't realized how much he'd missed it until it was back in his ear. Yeah, it wasn't under the most pleasant of circumstances, but there was something to it that just...

He knew he had to apologize. It's not like Eddie understood why he exiled himself from the rest of the group. To be fair, it's not like any of them knew. Plus, based on what Beverly had told them all back in Derry about her Deadlights experience, he didn't think he could articulate everything he saw. He didn't think he wanted to, either. But even if he did, he wouldn't know *how* .

Because who would believe --

Richie shook his head. The last thing remembered telling Eddie that they'd keep in touch. He remembered too many people in the airport. He remembered how weirdly sad Eddie doe-brown eyes looked and how, if he didn't leave then, Richie knew he would have risked kissing that man right on the mouth in the middle of departures.

How he'd kiss Eddie now, were he here, just to shut him up and see what would happen.

But I know your secret , sang a voice in his head. Sweat beaded on his neck. He looked around, but nothing was there. *Your dirty little secret.*

Eddie kept talking. He called Richie a fuckhead and a shitbird and a piece of dick cheese. It was poetry of the most vulgar variety.

Richie's free hand clenched into a fist as his stomach rolled again. He could talk a good game, daydream one, but he wouldn't do any of that because he was a fucking coward. Always had been, always would be.

“Well?” He imagined that if Eddie we’re here, his hands would be on his hips and he’d be giving Richie the same look he gave when they were kids: lips pursed, brows raised, eyes expectantly looking at him as if to say ‘I’m right and just waiting for you to admit it.’ “Are you gonna say anything?”

What Richie wanted was another drink.

What Richie needed was real food in his stomach, not an energy bar meant for crunchy hipsters stuck in a forest.

What Richie had to do was just utter two little, simple words: I’m sorry. Hell, he could have even said ‘my bad’ or ‘you’re right.’

“Have you ever seen Harry Potter?” Is what Richie said instead, because, of course he did. “You kinda remind me of like a human version of the howler Mama Weasley sends to Ron in the second one.”

Eddie made absolutely no noise on the other line.

“And it kinda works, too! You know, because ya little,” only he says little like ‘leedle’ and puts a weird Voice on. Whether he’d been trying for cowboy or childish, he had no fucking clue.

“*Really?* Un- *fucking*- believable -- can you ever be serious?” Eddie’s voice sounded like he just woke up. That, or he’d never slept in the first place. Richie’s stomach pulled. He didn’t know what idea was worse. “Like ever? In your life?”

“What can I say, Eds, you bring out the best in me.”

“Rich, seriously, what the fuck?”

Well wasn’t that the loaded question? Richie got up and made his way back into the kitchen. Good thing he had the answer: vodka soda. He was nowhere near drunk enough for any conversation with Eddie. Not by half.

“You want the long or the short answer, kid?”

“I am six months younger than you, Richie. *Months* ,” Eddie hissed.

“And I *want* is whatever answer you’re actually gonna give me. I at least deserve to know why you’ve apparently decided to keep in touch with everyone but me.”

Was that a hit of jealousy he detected in Eddie’s voice? A feeling, like a cousin to possessiveness, coiled at the base of his spine. Richie bit his lip and retrieved the whiskey from the top shelf, instead of the Svedka.

It was half past noon. He’d save the vodka for later. Still, he needed something to calm his heart and stomach; since he couldn’t order food at the moment, this would have to do. Richie gave it a healthy pour then remembered at the last second to give it enough room for a mixer, which was questionably old Country Time Lemonade from the very back of the fridge.

Instead of going back to the bedroom, Richie plopped himself down on one of the barstools under his breakfast bar countertop and used his finger to stir the drink.

“Well?” Eddie said.

“What do you want me to say, Eds?”

“Maybe ‘I’m sorry’ to start? Or --,”

Richie blurted out the chorus of the Buckcherry song, which makes Eddie groan at: “Stop! Stop it! Richie I’m being serious.”

“So am I, Eduardo -- I don’t know what you want me to say here.”

“Why are you being so difficult?”

“Does it matter?”

“Huh?”

Richie winced. He didn’t mean for it to come out as harsh as it did, but it was out there and he meant it. Because really -- what did it matter? He had been a prick to everyone, especially Eddie, but he had his reasons. Good reasons, too.

Remember how well it went the last time you told them?

But that last time hadn't really happened. Or had it? Richie tugged softly at his now short hair, not for the first time wishing he had never been a cocky asshole and gotten stuck in those fucking Deadlights. Because that was really the root of it all, wasn't it?

And yeah, maybe he hadn't been the most emotionally well adjusted before remembering Derry and his friends again, but then It came and fucked it all up further. Richie had gotten cocky. Gotten comfortable, maybe even felt safe. But It made sure to put him back in his place. Again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and --

"Of course it fucking matters, Rich," Eddie snapped. "You've been --,"

"I've been what, Eddie? A dickhead? A cock-goblin? Whatever the fuck other insult you want to throw at me right now? I know I've been avoiding you all and I'm sorry OK? I've just been busy and stressed and--,"

"--worrying us."

Oh. The fight left his body like air leaving a balloon.

"Look. I know what it feels like to have someone breathing down your neck, convinced there's something wrong. Know it probably better than anyone else," Eddie let out a joyless laugh. "I know how annoying it can be. But I'm not trying to be like that, Rich. Honest."

"I know, Eds."

"I just... I don't know what's going on. But I want to."

What's going on is, I think I've been here before , is what Richie wanted to say, *trying to explain this to all of you*. And what he wanted to say was: *What's going on is, I think you're going to forget me again* . And what he wanted to say was: *I'm doing this for your own good*.

The Deadlights had shown him things. Many things. Things he couldn't put into words. And maybe if he didn't try to, they wouldn't come true. But the things he'd Seen and the things that were

happening, now... they were starting to line up. There were too many coincidences to ignore.

And if things were starting to line up now, then --

Richie took a long drink from his glass. When he put it back down it was half empty.

"My manager died last night," he said, because he didn't know what else to do.

"What? Rich, oh my god, are you--,"

"They think it was a drunk driver," *Doesn't matter what they think, you know it was* . "But they're not sure. Preliminary autops--,"

"Stop. Richie, stop," Eddie's voice was firm. "Listen to me. Are you OK?"

"Well, it wasn't me who died, so--,"

" *Please* , Richie. Beep fuckin' beep."

Richie sighed. His entire body wanted nothing more to collapse in on itself. The only thing that had kept him moving over the last few weeks was alcohol, energy drinks and the occasional meal replacement bar costume designers kept pushing on him. He hadn't felt it before then, hadn't had to feel it, but now it was like his bones were ancient lumber and the termites in them had finally eaten through.

"When did you leave Derry?" Richie asked.

"What does this--,"

"I remember I left before you, but you couldn't have been there much longer after me. You got accepted to college, I remember. U-Mass?"

"Northeastern, actually. And you never applied."

Richie chuckled. "With brains like mine? Waste of money."

“You were Derry High’s fucking salutatorian.”

“Semantics.”

“Stay on topic,” said Eddie. “What does this have to do with your manager?”

A few days after high school graduation Richie had taken his ‘83 Grand Prix, shoved as much of his stuff as he could in the trunk and back seat, and hightailed it out of Derry as fast as possible. He knew he was going west. He knew he had just shy of two grand tucked throughout various pages of a well-worn copy of *Les Miserables* sitting in the passenger-side footwell. He knew he would call his friends when he got to where he was going and let them know he was safe, but in the meantime, he had to get out of that town before it killed him.

Richie was right about two of the three things.

He only ended up in L.A. because that’s where the car blew up, almost literally. He had neglected to change the oil along the trip and it had worn down the already old car. Fortune favored his boldness however, and he’d managed to sweet talk his way into working at a bar that doubled as a comedy club. He’d tend during the late hours and, if it was slow, had the chance to test his material as the occasional opening act during free mic night.

“When I left Derry,” Richie said slowly. “Todd was the guy who discovered me. Signed me.”

And that’s where Todd found him, five years later. Twenty-three and making it, but only by the skin of his teeth. Todd cornered him after the show. Said there was something about Richie that he could see, like a prospector who’d found his gold nugget, hidden in layers of shit and dirt and rock. He was the first person to give a rat’s ass about Richie -- well, since Derry. But at that point, the Losers were nothing but a pinprick in his mental rear view mirror.

Todd was the first warm, open hand, that wasn’t apt to turn into a fist at a moment’s notice.

"After I ran away, Todd was the first guy -- the only guy -- who actually gave a shit about me."

"Oh," Eddie's voice was so soft, Richie thought he almost didn't speak. "I'm sor--,"

"Don't get me wrong, he was a fucking sleeze, too. It almost took me three years to realize he was taking about a sixty percent cut of my wages to fuel a massive coke addiction that he tried to pass off as a charge for meals we'd get on the road,"-- Eddie snorted and the noise made Richie laugh -- "Yeah, that's pretty funny actually in hindsight, shut up. But he was also the guy who set me up to where I am today. He dicked me down -- and before you ask, no, not literally -- but I don't know if I'd be where I'm at today if it wasn't for him, you know? He was a sleeze but... he was my sleeze, I guess."

"It was what you knew," Eddie said. "He was bad, but there was good too."

"Christ, you make me sound like an abuse victim. He was just an asshole. An asshole who made me famous and I made him rich." He finished the rest of his drink. "Well, richer. I think it worked out OK in the end for the both of us."

Eddie made a noise of agreement. The drink in Richie's veins made him warm and the in-out of Eddie's breathing on the line made him want to fall asleep. Maybe he wouldn't need drugs to not dream if he had this every night.

God, could you get any sappier ?

"That's not it though."

"Hm?" Richie snapped back to attention.

"You said your manager... that it happened last night," Eddie paused. "This has been going on since we came back. The missing calls and not talking thing. It's because of something else, isn't it?"

"I--," But what could he say? Nothing, was the thing. Eddie was right and knew Richie too well, was too smart, to be bullshitted in the way Richie was good at.

If there was one person who could get through his defenses, it was Eddie. Every time.

“Isn’t it?” Eddie asked again.

“Again: I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“The truth, maybe?” Eddie sighed. “Why is this like pulling teeth? Are you always this difficult?”

“It’s my middle name, baby.”

Richie’s face heated up as the pet name slipped out. *Stupid. Stupid!* He suddenly was thankful this was just a call and not FaceTime or Skype.

“Richard Difficult Tozier does have a ring to it.”

“That’s me. Dick Difficult.”

“Oh my god,” Eddie moaned.

“And that’s exactly what --,”

“My mom said or whatever, yeah I know. Get new material.”

“Everyone’s a critic.”

“Rich, she’s been dead for like eight years. I’m begging you: New material.”

“Love never dies, Eddie Spaghetti. Or at least, that’s what Andrew Lloyd Webber tried to sell me with that Phantom of the Opera reboot.”

“It wasn’t a reboot. Love Never Dies was a sequel.”

“Ah! So I see you’re a man of culture as well.”

Eddie let out a noise that was somewhere between a squeal and a groan. But then he laughed and it lit Richie up like he’d shoved a fork in a wall socket. It also twisted his stomach in a way he couldn’t put into words, which only made it twist worse.

“Stop distracting me! You keep trying to change the subject and I --,”

--don’t want to talk about it, Eddie,” said Richie. His voice was playful but his hands, which had been absently tracing the lip of the empty glass as they went back and forth, had at some point started to tremor. “You should probably have gotten that by now.”

“But *why* ?”

He knew he was being petulant but as the wine and whiskey kicked in more, Richie found he didn’t quite care. “Do I need a reason?”

“I dunno, maybe because we’re *friends* ?” Eddie’s voice took on the tone it did when they were kids: when he had worked himself into a frenzy and finally it had smashed out of his tiny body at 100 words per minute. “Maybe because we’ve been through shit that other people can’t even conceptualize even in their worst, most coked out nightmares? Maybe it’s because we actually give a fuck now that we all remember again? Maybe it’s because we care about you? Because, god forbid, I care about you?”

As Eddie’s voice rose in pitch, Richie found himself standing and making his way back to the liquor shelf. He opened the cabinet and eyed the whiskey. When Eddie was finished he reached for it, opened it, and took a pull straight from the bottle.

He sighed. “I know you guys do.”

“Are you sick?”

“ *What* ?”

“Is it cancer? Lymphoma? Encephalitis?”

“Are you asking me if I’m *dying* ?”

“It’s the only thing I could think of that would make you act like this. *Are* you sick? You doing some type of wounded animal thing where you go away from the rest of the pack to die or some stupid shit like that? Because --,”

“No! Jesus Christ, Eddie,” Richie snorted. “I’m not dying. Holy shit

how did you even --,”

“Then you saw something.”

Richie stilled. He could play dumb, but it wouldn't work. He could hang up, but it wouldn't actually stop the problem. He could say yes, and he knew what would happen when he opened that can of worms: nothing worth living through.

His lips and fingers began to tingle in that way that only being drunk could do, making them feel like they were set to the static channel on a television. That same, high pitched whine shot between his ears.

“You saw something in the Deadlights, didn't you.” It wasn't a question but a statement of fact.

Why yes, yes I did Eddie boy . I saw you die. I saw me save you. I saw so many other, different things that I'm afraid I'm going crazy, just like everyone always called me when we were kids. Only that time, they were joking and this time -- this time --

“Richie?”

But you'll never guess what, Eddie, some of that cosmo-bullshit I saw? Well, it's coming true! So did we really put an end to It or am I just losing my mind? Can I see the future or am I just a kook? Am I finally funny? Nutty? Fucking bonkers like Bowers?

He took another pull from the bottle.

“I'm not gonna let it drop until you answer me.”

He told himself the dreams he'd been having after the Deadlights, after Derry, were just that: Dreams. But he knew that it wasn't it. He knew they were different versions of his life. Different lives he could have lead. Different lives he did lead in another time, another place -- another universe? Maybe. Or maybe it was this universe. Maybe it was just later along in this lifetime. Maybe none of it was real.

The Deadlights were a weird, limitless place. They showed him many things, possibilities, each more terrible and mind-numbing than the last until his head felt like it was a zit ready to explode across the

face pimple-popping happy teen. They had shown him that there was a Richie Tozier in every universe and in every universe that Richie Tozier was in, he was a fuck up. And for every Richie Tozier there was a Beverly Marsh and a Ben Hanscom, a Big Bill, Stan The Man, Eddie Spaghetti and a Mike Hanlon, too.

And while they all went somewhere, Richie spun his wheels in place.

“Richie, please,” Eddie’s voice sounded far away but Richie knew it wasn’t the connection to blame. “I want to help you. We want to help you.”

But helping was the problem, wasn’t it? Any time Richie interfered, as the Lights showed him, bad things happened. Even when he did the right thing, after awhile, it always turned out wrong. He was like the anti-Midas: everything he touched or helped or loved turned to absolute shit. Who’s to say he wasn’t still stuck in that fucking cave, peeking in on another pathetic Richie Tozier, drinking his life away?

Truly, who was to say? No one. No one but It.

The thought put his arm hairs on end.

He reached for his glass on the tabletop, but his aim was off, numbed by his drinks. Instead, he clumsily pawed it right off the granite-top, sending it spiraling to the floor. It shattered with a loud pop, causing Richie to gasp and hiss out a low curse.

“ *Richie ?*” Eddie yelled. “What’s going on, are you OK? What’s happeni--,”

“It’s OK, Eddie, Jesus. I just--,” Richie pulled a hand over his face. He put the bottle down next to the sink, steadying himself. “Just dropped a glass. Everything’s fine. Everything’s --,” the room swooped, suddenly, “Ah, fuck, OK maybe n’t as fine as --,”

“Are you drunk?”

Richie made a ‘pfft’ noise. “And? If I am?”

“Bill said you were drinking the last time he called too.”

“Oh, so I have to check in with you guys if I want a drink now?”

“No!” Eddie said, alarmed. “That’s not what I meant and you know it. Just that he said --,”

“And wait, wait, wait, timeout -- how the fuck do you know that I was drinking when I was talking to him?”

“Because he told us.”

Richie’s face grew hot. Whether it was from embarrassment or anger, he didn’t know -- didn’t care. “Told *us* ? As in everyone? When the *fuck* did this happen?”

“The other nigh-- you know what, no. Why does it matter? If you won’t answer my questions, why the fuck do I have to answer yours?”

“Because apparently all you fuckers are talking about me behind my back! Is this fucking highschool?”

“We weren’t fucking *gossiping* , meathead, we were talking about how to help you!”

“Well maybe I don’t need, nor do I want, your fucking help!”

Richie knew he should shut up. He knew his mouth ran more when he was drunk and he knew he was going to say something stupid he’d regret. If there was one thing Richie was good at, though, it was ignoring the warning signs and blowing through red lights. It was putting his foot on the gas and throwing a cinder block down on it, hurting himself and everyone else in the process.

“Did you ever think about that, *Sonia* ?” He couldn’t miss Eddie’s sharp inhale even if he wanted to, and it hurt. *Twist the knife, Tozier* . “Or did you just want to swoop in and save the day from whatever problem you decided I had? Is this fun for you?”

“You’re being an asshole,” said Eddie, the fight having left his voice. “I don’t get why you’re being so *stupid* , when --,”

“When *what* , Eddie? You decided I had a problem? You all

apparently pow-wowed and thought ‘oh, gee, Richie’s acting fucking crazy better armchair diagnose all his problems’.”

“That’s not --,”

“When really, my only fucking *problem* is that I’m tired OK? I’m so tired I could drop dead. In fact, I wish I could drop dead. I’m working like 100 hours a week either on set or doing rewrites and it’s fucking exhausting, alright? But all you guys have your own time and your own lives and schedules that don’t revolve around you being at everyone’s beck and call all hours of the day.”

Richie pulled his glasses off and rubbed at his eyes. Good Christ, they ached. When was the last time he blinked?

“But we’re not fucking kids anymore who can just ring each others doorbells anytime we feel like it. I just want to sleep, OK? And if I get drunk a little too often -- so what? It’s my fucking life! If you think I’m running it into the ground then that’s fine: No one asked you to care!”

“Richie--,”

“Just like, I don’t know. Worry about your fucking hot wife or your bangin’ Wall Street job or whatever fucking risks you have to assess next week. I don’t give a shit,” he lied, mowing right over Eddie’s protest of “I’m-- We’re not--.”

“Bev and Ben and Mike and Bill -- fucking all of you can butt out,” *because it’s easier this way*, “because I don’t need your sympathy and I sure as *shit* don’t need your pity. I just need sleep and to be left alone. Do you understand? I’m not sick. I’m not dying. I’m not anything except tired and hungry and a little fucking stressed because someone close to me died last night and now I’m finding out some other people close to me are --,”

But it was Eddie’s turn to get the next word in, and he made sure Richie knew it, shouting into his receiver: “Will you let me TALK!?”

“Fine,” Richie huffed. “Go ahead. Please.”

“We weren’t *gossiping* about you, we --,” Eddie’s voice trailed off. He

sighed. "I guess it was kind of gossiping."

"*Thank* you."

"But it wasn't malicious or anything. I still want to know why you've been ignoring me. Not Bill. Not Bev -- Me. I just..." Richie could almost see Eddie trying to gather his thoughts in his mind's eye, scrunching his nose and furrowing his brows like he did when they were kids, and which somehow trailed over to adulthood. "When we went back to Derry, I remembered so much. So much shit I just never questioned, that was this big black spot in my memory -- like where I learned to ride a bike or the name of the street I lived on as a kid."

Richie made a noise of understanding. He got it, he did.

"And when I saw you at the restaurant, it all just came flooding back: the stupid shit we got up to, reading comics with you over the fucking crawlspace in my garage, that time you dumped an entire soda on Bower's gang at The Aladdin just because that was the week he came up with the nickname 'Puff the Magic Faggot' for me and you thought it was --,"

"--shit that you just took it," Richie finished, "because you didn't want anyone to get into a fight over you and your asthma. Yeah. I remember, too."

"He beat the hell out of you when he caught you."

Richie shrugged. "Worth it."

"And that's what I'm talking about," said Eddie. "What happened? We used to be friends. I would say best friends, but you had Stan --,"

"-- and you had Big Bill. Yeah."

They lapsed into a tense silence that made Richie squirm in place. He knew what he wanted to say and he knew what he had to say. It was just a shame those were two different things.

"But we are still friends." Richie hated how uncertain Eddie's voice sounded. "Right?"

“Of course, Eds,” and then softer, “Forever.”

“So why won’t you tell me what’s going on in your head?”

He didn’t miss how Eddie hadn’t bothered to correct him on the nickname.

It made something he’d rather not talk about bloom in his chest.

So he didn’t. He fought down a smile said what he needed to, instead of what he wanted.

“Because,” he said, thinking that once he hung up, he was going to smash the rest of that whiskey and go right back to bed. “It’s easier this way. I know you don’t understand but it is. And I’m sorry. I really am.”

Richie pulled the phone away from his ear and, ignoring Eddie’s slightly panicked voice, ended the call. He flicked on the ‘Do Not Disturb’ mode. He drank straight from the bottle, standing over the sink, until not even his glasses could help him see straight anymore. Maybe then he wouldn’t think about car crashes or accidental drowning or being impaled by an alien clown.

And maybe, as Richie’s stomach lurched in the way it did before vomiting, he’d drink himself to death before he’d see any of that shit anyways. Wouldn’t be the first time.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy almost Halloween! Thought I'd drop a two for one special on you. Also please mind the tags moving forward because they will be applicable as we progress. Also, Richie's views on therapy and alcoholism do not reflect mine, but I figured a 40-year-old hyper repressed man probably wouldn't have the best outlook on self-help. What can you do?

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, OK -- first off: doozy of a chapter incoming. (The longest one to date, actually.) Sorry for the dump but I didn't know where to stop that didn't feel like I was shortchanging anything and leaving anyone hanging. That being said, there are slight graphic descriptions in this chapter so please heed the tags and if you're not sure please feel free to click to the end notes to double check everything's good for you. Thanks again for everyone sticking with me while I churn this out!

The call left a sour taste in Eddie's mouth, not unlike the residue left at the back of his throat after taking his daily iron pill.

It's easier this way.

I'm sorry, I really am.

What the *fuck* did that mean? Richie had never been one to be cryptic when they were kids. If he had something to say, he said it. If he felt something, he made sure the others felt it too. Reservation, cautiousness – they just weren't words in Richie's vocabulary, as far as Eddie was aware. Even when they met up, years later... OK, yes, he seemed jittery – but they all were.

Suddenly remembering you forgot your entire childhood, not because of the natural passage of time (which could partly be blamed) or because of trauma (which could definitely be blamed) but because of some hoodoo-galaxy-sci-fi forces could really do that to a person. (Not that Eddie had any other points of reference to go off of, but he felt comfortable speaking for the group on that one.)

I don't want to talk about it.

When did Richie not want to talk? Talking was his *thing* – literally! He made his living out of moving his mouth and talking at and to

other people. Was it a problem that he had with work then? Eddie's stomach turned. Was it a problem Richie had with one of them? With *him* ?

If Richie wouldn't talk to him, fine. Eddie had other ways around that. Maybe not the most accurate ways, but ways nevertheless.

He grabbed his laptop from the kitchen table, kicked his feet up in the living room with a beer and – once things were up and running – typed “Richie Tozier” into Google.

Sure, he'd looked up Richie previously, both before Eddie remembered him and after. But the first time he'd been looking for a specific special a work colleague had recommended – which was hot garbage – and the second time it was to specifically prove a point to Bill that Richie's style hadn't changed a lick since they were kids.

At neither time was he particularly interested in salacious gossip sites or news articles. The first time around, he didn't care about the personal life of a comedian that gave him a weird sense of *deja vu*. The second time, knowing and remembering Richie, it almost felt like being a peeping tom. If he wanted to know something about Richie, he'd ask and not be a creep about it.

But he did ask – and that went nowhere. So this was justified. Truly. At least, that's what he repeated to himself under his breath, just the slightest bit guilty as his laptop processed the task. Eddie smacked the enter key again with his pinky, just to see if it would load faster. Somehow, it did.

The page populated with basic stuff Eddie assumed all famous people had: A link to a personal tour and merch website, a Wikipedia page, some relevant YouTube clips of his most popular stand-up, an IMDB page and his Twitter page. There were a few interviews with various niche news organizations about upcoming shows, dated from several years ago, but it seemed like everything petered out after March of the current year.

Eddie clicked on the Twitter account. The posts were clearly run through the public relations ringer, not sounding anything like Richie did. What wasn't some post thanking patrons was a joke that better

suited a Popsicle stick or a sponsored ad. Everything felt... cold. Off. Richie's official Instagram wasn't any better: genuine photos sporadically posted, usually comprising either (admittedly) delicious looking dinners or pictures of dogs.

At least that account felt a little more like him.

I don't write my own jokes , Eddie remembered Richie said saying back at the restaurant. At the time he'd laughed, positively giddy about being right that Richie's words weren't his own. He laughed because it meant Eddie knew Richie, really knew him, before he even remembered him – that the nagging sense of familiarity wasn't all in his head. They really had been friends.

Now— knowing how funny Richie could be, when allowed to just be Richie — it just made Eddie's stomach clench. Making Richie stick to someone else's script, parrot someone else's words, was like catching a rare bird and caging, acting surprised when it inevitably stress-plucked all its feathers out and died.

Eddie groaned, slapping himself lightly on the cheeks. Where had that thought even come from? No one was going to die. He was just overreacting. Over thinking. It was what he did, and always had done, best.

It might not hurt just to check up on him , Eddie thought, *Bev and Ben do live just down the street. Kinda.*

He backed out of Richie's social media pages and clicked through some of the older news articles. Richie, Eddie noticed, had a very specific pattern to these interviews. It was almost like he'd developed a formula, or maybe that manager of his had: crack a few jokes, lay out the project, complement the interviewer, crack another joke then thank them for their time.

Over and over and over again; if Eddie hadn't compared three different articles from across the span of five years, maybe he wouldn't even have noticed it. It was the same $A+B=C$. Similar jokes, similar answers, similar pitch of laugh – like the fake one Eddie remembered Richie using when he was trying to schmooze Morton Fowler, who owned Derry's only comic shop, into giving them a

discount on their monthly stacks.

God, he hadn't thought about Mr. Fowler in years. He hadn't thought about anything much from Derry. But it was coming back, slower now than it had when first crossing into city limits, but coming back nevertheless. Not only was he remembering more people, but he was remembering specific memories – brighter and more powerful than even recent ones from his wedding or college or even last year.

It was like having them snuffed for so long somehow made them more vivid – like Eddie could still taste the mint chocolate chip ice cream he shared with Richie after the Apocalyptic Rock War; hear the Neibolt Street Church gospel choir as he took the long way home from the quarry; feel the clammy touch of Richie's hand as he pulled at Eddie's face, trying so desperately to get him to look anywhere but at It while Eddie's heart thrummed like that of a hawk-hunted mouse.

Richie turned his back on the clown just to make sure I couldn't look at It, Eddie thought, realizing years later he did the exact same thing — firing the fence post into It's maw to get Richie out of the Deadlights, the only thought on Eddie's mind being: *Not him. You can have me but not him.*

Maybe something else was coming back, too. Not just memories but something he'd tried a long, long time to forget – and had maybe even succeeded at, for awhile. But just like the memories, which could be dimmed but not forgotten, the feelings were just as white hot and intense as they were when he was 12 and 15 and 18.

Because even if Eddie's brain could forget, his heart would remember – as permanent as the letter R, ringed by a heart, Eddie carved into the Kissing Bridge on prom night; as clear as the dreams he'd had at 17, which had somehow started resurfacing again at 40. Eddie's cheeks flushed. If Richie was having problems, the last thing he needed was for Eddie to thrust his own Christ-I-might-have-repressed-the-fact-I'm-gay-for-you-so-hard-I-married-a-version-of-my-mom crisis into the mix as well.

This time, Eddie typed "Richie Tozier news" into the search bar.

Again the articles were years old this time, save for a few

highlighting his upcoming show, and there were more entertainment blogs than actual site names he recognized. There was nothing outrageous about anything that came back though – no pregnancy scandals, arrests, or bar fights. Sure there was the clickbait headline or two about Richie possibly being drunk in public after an event, but Eddie figured it was par for the course when making a living included people following you around with cameras.

Yet, for a man whose life revolved around being in public – the center of attention, even – there was surprisingly little personal information out there about Richie. Even his Wiki page listed the bare minimum: a place and date of birth, where he went to school, the names of his specials or bit film parts. That was it. Like Richie only existed to the extent his ‘Trashmouth’ persona did and when he took it off – poof. Gone.

Perhaps that was how Richie wanted it, Eddie thought. He couldn’t begin to understand the problems that came with fame, but he could empathize. Even if Richie wasn’t on the level of Conan O’Brien or David Letterman in terms of name recognition, at least when you said his name, people knew it. Maybe he just wanted to be left alone and live a nice quiet life.

I’m just tired OK? I’m just so tired I could drop dead .

The words kept bouncing around Eddie’s head, creating a composition of the Richie from his childhood which didn’t line up with the sad eyes of the tired man he said goodbye to in Bangor International. Had he always been like this? Weary? Beaten? No. Absolutely not, no. Eddie was certain this was new. There were too many memories, feelings, that he couldn’t chalk up to just life.

There was something else. There had to be.

Against his better interest, he clicked on the Images tab. Eddie resisted the urge to look around like someone was going to catch him in a dirty act. He lived alone for Christ’s sake! It wasn’t like he was watching *porn* – and even if he was, he lived alone!

Alone.

By himself.

Single.

He could watch porn if he wanted and he could look at paparazzi pics of his famous friend if he wanted to, too. (Repeating that did nothing to uncoil his guts.)

Eddie scrolled through photo after photo of Richie's face, which was lined by age but still handsome in its own right. *Handsome* ? Yes, handsome. He had to be able to admit these feelings at some point, and if he couldn't now -- in his own home -- then when? The tips of Eddie's ears burned as he looked, really looked, at Richie's face. Once upon a time Bev had said Richie would grow into his looks and truly, he did: sharp cheeks, large brown eyes, chiseled jaw.

Sure, he could use a shave and a haircut maybe, but Eddie had no problem admitting Richie turned out handsome. It was just a fact. Totally normal to say your friend was hot if he was hot. Like Ben! Ben turned out really hot, and no one had a problem with admitting it over dinner. Only difference was, Ben was like the posterboy for every heterosexual medieval sex-fantasy novel. Thinking he was hot was like having eyeballs.

The sight of Ben shirtless on a white horse, galloping down a glade with Beverly sitting side saddle behind him, holding tight to his washboard abs, flittered through Eddie's brain. Oh, fucking Christ, this was not a road he wanted to go down -- ogling his now-famous childhood friends via Google and fantasizing while he birdsipped at a room-temp Heineken, furiously pretending he didn't want to sit on one of their--NOPE!

Oh he couldn't do this. He couldn't do it.

Eddie squeezed his eyes shut, embarrassed.

Get back on topic. Back on topic, Kaspbrak.

He must have accidentally bumped his computer's touch screen because when Eddie opened his eyes again, there before him was a serious looking picture of Richie dressed as a cop. The article slug

identified it as a costume for some comedy about a police agency. Eddie didn't even have time to look as he clicked out of it like he'd opened malware, making a very *dignified* squeak of terror as he did, if anyone were to ask.

This time he did do a quick glance around his living room, terrified someone was going to crawl out from under his entertainment center and scream 'gotcha!' But like he already knew, there was nothing and nobody there.

"You're being creepy," he singsonged under his breath, heart returning to normal pace as he tabbed through photos. What was he looking for? He had no idea anymore. "You're being so, so fucking creepy."

He landed on a candid shot of Richie, one from a tabloid that caught him outside a coffee shop. The date on the link put it five-ish months ago – before Derry. Eddie had to admit, Richie did look dog tired. The next photo had caught him in the middle of a laugh though, and Richie's smile brought a small, matching one to Eddie's lips.

The link showed it was from roughly a month ago, taken on a set of something right in Cali. It seemed like for every possible piece of evidence he found for one answer, then he found another, contradicting one. Eddie was no closer to figuring anything out since he started. Honestly, he didn't even know if he expected to either.

Thoughts of the Deadlights again surfaced and Eddie groaned. He couldn't stop. No matter what he did, it kept coming back. It was like he knew he was going in the right direction, felt a pull deep in his chest, but didn't know the end destination. Like traversing through the sewers all over again as a boy – Eddie knew they had to find the clown, knew how to get them there, but he couldn't tell them why. He just did. He just knew. His feet and heart understood where the path was, even if his brain couldn't comprehend.

The Losers had their own magic, stronger than even Pennywise's, that seemed to transcend It's demise. Even though the scars were gone, something more powerful than simple friendship bound the seven of them together. Eddie knew this as much as he knew his heart beat and his lungs took air. Where one of them went, even if it took

awhile, all of them followed. And if one of their own was hurting, then they'd figure out why and stop it.

He made a noise of frustration and snapped the laptop shut, laying his head back against the armchair's headrest to stare at the white of his apartment ceiling. Unsurprisingly, it yielded no answers. Eddie sighed. His brain bounced back and forth between what he knew was logical and what he felt in his heart. Maybe this was Richie now – tired and reserved. Maybe this was what Eddie had missed in the 27 years since they'd been apart and the Deadlights weren't to blame for anything.

But maybe not.

Across the room, still attached to its charger in the kitchen, Eddie's cell phone buzzed. He thought again of Bev and Ben. Maybe, all Richie needed was a check in. A physical one. One he couldn't hang up on or ignore the texts of. Eddie nodded to himself, cogs turning in his brain.

Maybe Ben and Bev weren't a subway's ride away, or whatever the fuck they had in California, but they were closer than the six hours it would take him to get to Richie. It wouldn't take much time either, just a quick hello. In and out. Just to make sure Richie was still breathing and everything was OK. Which it had to be.

This was par for the course – typical Eddie overthinking things and making his friends assure him that everything was OK. Whether he be 14 or 40, they would always come running because that's how they operated. A kid, he remembered screaming about scabs or bugs or tetanus or rabies and his friends would put on a show of checking for monsters under the bed where none could be found. And Eddie, happy though grumbling, would be proven wrong and wearing their good natured teasing like an albatross for the rest of the day.

All these years later, it would still be the same. It had to be.

He made his way into the kitchen and dialed Bev. But before he did that he opened incognito mode and once again looked up “Richie Tozier.” And if he saved that cop photo to his phone, it was between him and God. No one else had to know.

Sunday was the one day a week people from the office knew not to bother her unless there was an engagement otherwise already scheduled. So when Bev's phone buzzed, face down, on the coffee table it was one of two things: one of her boys or the divorce attorney.

"You don't have to get it," said Ben. He was doing his very best impression of a lazy house cat, draped across her and demanding attention.

She pulled lightly at his bangs and tutted. "It could be important."

"More important than me?"

"I think I liked it better when you pined from afar. So needy" she snorted. "Now, phone me, Mr. Hanscom. I can't move with your massive head weighing me down."

Ben muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "this house is a nightmare," but rolled over and gave her the phone anyways. Right as she grabbed it, the call clicked over to voicemail.

Eddie Kaspbrak

Missed Call (2)

Bev's brow furrowed. He had called earlier? Perhaps the television was too loud, or she wasn't paying attention.

"Who was it?"

"Eddie."

Ben made a noise of understanding and reached for the remote. On screen, Mélanie Laurent's paused in the midst of telling her on-screen husband to burn down their cinema full of Nazis. Bev pushed Ben's

head off her lap and made her way into the bedroom, dialing Eddie as she went.

It rang once.

“Hey – uh, how close do you live to Richie?”

“Hi Eddie, how are you? I’m doing great, thanks for asking. Ben’s fine too–,”

“Sorry, Bev, sorry. Can we start again?”

They exchanged pleasantries for a moment before Bev told him to cut the bullshit. She and Eddie were friends, there was no doubt about that, but their one-on-one chats usually was the result of a problem or a worry. They came to one another for protection. When they were kids, he was always more apt to go to Bill or Mike with his small problems just like she was more apt to try and talk to Ben or Richie.

Big problems, life altering problems, that was an Eddie and Bev thing. Time hadn’t changed that one bit.

“I called Richie today.”

“He picked up?”

“I was just as shocked as you are.”

“So...”

Eddie launched into his story, painting for her a picture of a picture of Richie she couldn’t square – sad, cryptic, drunk and hurting. *Richie? Our Richie?* She thought of the Leonard Nimoy and Jeff Goldblum film where the aliens replaced a carbon copy of all humans with an identical likeness. Everything exactly the same, down to the very last freckle, except the emotions.

It was one of the films Bill had snuck from his parent’s movie collection and brought to their weekly movie night. The idea stuck with her long after they parted ways for the night, then long after that too: *If I was replaced by an alien clone, would anyone notice ?*

Of course they would, she thought then, because they knew each other like they knew every freckle and scar on their own bodies. Now, she wasn't so certain. If a thousand year old, child eating alien clown living under their hometown was real, who was to say the Body Snatchers weren't real either? Bev sighed.

Don't be ridiculous.

"I'm sure this isn't the only thing you wanted to talk to me about," she said.

"I just — could you to check up on him? You know, make sure he's OK."

Bev was surprised she and Ben hadn't thought of the idea before Eddie proposed it. They had both just been so busy recently with their own lives... and checking in on Richie, like they were his parents or something? It just seemed intrusive.

"Like a welfare check?"

"Maybe? I don't know – I just..."

"What?"

Eddie paused and the silence stretched on for so long she thought he might have accidentally hung up. "You ever get a feeling in your gut when you know something is wrong but you don't know why? Like, there's no real reason for you to feel as on edge..., but you know something is wrong? Even if that wrong thing hasn't happened yet?"

She knew it very well. That gut feeling was the only thing, honed by years of abuse, that kept her from being prematurely killed – first by her father and then by Tom. Bev was sure Eddie had developed a version of that too, if their short 'oh, wow, so you also married your parental figure' conversation back at the Derry Inn was anything to go by.

"I think something bad is going to happen to Rich," he said, so quiet Beverly almost didn't hear him. "Or – I'm afraid that something has already happened. Does that make sense?"

It did. If two was coincidence and three was a pattern, then Bev, Bill and Eddie's interactions with Richie over the last month meant trouble. Maybe not right now trouble, but the storm was on the horizon and it was time to bring everyone inside for cover. Whether Richie was the storm or was running from it because it was a problem of his own making, though... well wasn't that the million dollar question?

Bev thought then of Stan. She thought of his bathroom. She'd seen his death years before it happened, but losing the memories of her childhood to It had Beverly writing off the nightmare as just a bad dream. The familiarity of Stan's face was just because she might have seen it before in a crowd – not because she had spent years in the same hometown, same classrooms, same friend group.

If something was wrong with Richie, this time around, did they have the ability to stop it? Did she? Killing It broke the 27 year cycle. It's death made sure none of those visions she had in the Deadlights, that she dreamed about for almost two decades, came true. There was nothing to be afraid of except the fear that a friend might be hurting and they had no clue how or why.

Repeating that did nothing to stymie the apprehensive nausea which had overcome her suddenly. Probably because before, there was a clear answer: Kill that clown. But now...

"I'm not being crazy, right?" Eddie asked. "Like I know I can be crazy and I know I can overthink things and I know you're probably rolling your eyes at me because I'm overbearing, or whatever but–,"

"Eddie ."

"What?"

Beverly laughed softly. "You're not being too much. Not much more than you normally are, anyways. I was just thinking."

"About?"

"Stan," she said, before she could stop herself.

"Oh," Eddie cleared his throat. "You don't – With Richie, and what

you said before – what *I* said a second ago, you don't –,"

"No." The lie came easy; as easy as when they were kids. If she worked Eddie into a frenzy now, there was no way she could handle Richie here and an aneurysm in New York. "When we beat it, we made sure that stuff didn't happen."

"And how do you know?"

"Because—," *You weren't supposed to make it out of the cistern and yet, somehow, here you are. You were supposed to die in Neibolt and yet Richie somehow saved you.* "I just— I don't, alright? Trust me. I think Richie just might need a reminder that he's not alone anymore."

None of them were, and they'd be remiss to forget it.

"And a slap upside the head," grumbled Eddie. She knew it was for show. "Puttin' us through all this shit."

"If it was easy, though, it wouldn't be us."

"You can say that again."

"If it was easy, thou—,"

"Oh my god," he chuckled. "You're just as bad as Richie. No, no I take that back. No one can be worse than him."

"Yeah, at least I leave your dead mother out of my mouth."

"I would hope my mother, dead or otherwise, would be nowhere *near* your mouth."

She laughed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ben peak his head into the bedroom, looking puzzled. Bev held up a finger, the universal sign of just-wait-one-second. When he silently mouthed *Is everything OK* she shrugged. The wrinkle in his brow mirrored exactly how she felt, jokes aside.

If it wasn't one thing, it was another because their little band of misfits seemed to never be able to catch a cosmic break. It took Bev a second to realize Eddie had been speaking when her attention was on

Ben, and she apologized. He waved it off.

"I'm not... *overstepping* anything, right?" Eddie asked. "Like it literally took me almost an hour to work up the nerve to call you because I was afraid I was being a fucking creep. I mean, Richie was kinda right in weird way: He's an adult. We're not kids anymore. If he wants to spend his forties drinking and moping then that's his prerogative, you know? I just--,"

Eddie stopped and took a breath.

"Something feels wrong, Bev. Something I can't put my finger on but I know it's wrong. And I know we need to be there."

"When you say know..."

"It's the same way I knew how to get us through the sewers when we were kids. I can't define it. I just... *know*," he sighed. "And I'll beg you if you want, but I really just – please, *please* go see Richie. Call him first or whatever so we're not ambushing him but do something with him. Take him out. Go see a movie or some shit, just get him out of his apartment."

"Christ, you make this sound like we're taking my grandfather out of a nursing home."

"We might as well be. He's been dressing like a tourist dad from Florida since he was twelve."

"Pretty harsh since he's not even here to defend himself."

"Well," Eddie made a noise with his mouth that sounded like a horse's snort. "He can defend his fashion atrocities to someone once he sees them. In person. Not on the phone or through a computer. I'm not taking any criticism otherwise."

"I mean, it's not really criticizing if you're right."

"Exactly. Coming from a woman of high fashion herself!"

Bev started to tell him goodbye when he stopped her. "Call me after you check up with him?" Then softer: "Please?"

Her heart clenched. Eddie's voice reminded her of Ben's, in a strange way she couldn't quite put her finger on. It was similar to the tone he took when talking about her, when he thought she wasn't listening, speaking to someone about how much he – *Oh* .

She was glad no one was around to ask why her cheeks had suddenly pinkened. A soft smile wrapped her lips. "Of course, honey. You'll be the first person I call."

Later, she'd curse God and all his angels that she had to.

The ride to Richie's was just more than an hour, not considering traffic, and Beverly made Ben drive. She planned to originally, but the second her hand touched the gearshift, her whole body started to shake so bad Beverly thought they were experiencing an earthquake. She couldn't pull the Jeep out of park, let alone drive them onto the expressway like that, and Ben told her as much.

With a huff, she climbed into the passenger seat and called Richie. It's not like they needed to worry about putting more lives in danger anyways tonight. The line rang four times then clicked over to voicemail.

Stop it. No one's in danger , she chided herself, *You're overreacting. Eddie's overreacting. We'll all have one big laugh about this later once we come to our senses* .

Beverly pushed the tip of Richie's spare key into the palm of her opposite hand hard enough to sting. He'd given it to her just before they left Derry. Technically it was his only key at the time, but he waved her off and said he'd just make another copy. He'd pressed it into her now-scarless hand when she told him about Tom and about leaving him and about running away with Ben.

“Just in case you ever need somewhere safe,” he told her, pressing a kiss into her hairline as he enveloped her in a bearhug. “ *Mi casa, su casa* and all that.”

Now she hoped that safety extended to Richie as well.

It would. It will. It has to.

Ben cleared his throat, bringing her back to now. “Do you think Eddie’s right? That something’s...” he let the question hang in the air.

Beverly told him everything after hanging up the phone, lips trembling as she spoke at an even pace. Even now, she felt eerily calm despite her stomach writhing around. But the closer they got to Richie’s apartment, the more that twisting amplified. It was like her brain knew something her heart didn’t want to accept. Maybe Eddie was on to something with that feeling. Maybe they all were more connected than any of them realized.

Beverly opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She pressed the key harder into her palm.

Ben took a hand off the wheel, laid it across her knee and squeezed. The GPS on the dash chimed. A cool robotic voice informed them there was only five minutes left until they reached their destination.

“You can stay in the ca-,”

“No.” She shook her head. That was one thing she was certain of: She was going in there. Because god damn it, if Richie was acting freaky enough to scare Eddie then he was going to get a piece of her mind for worrying them all. “No, I’m going in. Everything’s fine,” she forced a smile, “I’m just being... weird.”

“Alright.”

She put her free hand on top of Ben’s and squeezed back. His lips quirked into a soft smile. That was the difference between Ben and Tom – among many, many, *many* other things. While she’d always possessed it, Ben had reminded her she had the ability to be firm. To be bold. If there was something going on, she was going to get to the bottom of it. If Richie needed help, then by god, she was going to

offer it to him.

And if he thought he didn't need it, then she was going to give it to him anyways. They all would. Because that's what family did. That's what their little rag-tag group was, no matter the distance.

Bev pulled her phone back out of her purse in the footwell and gave Richie another ring.

I am always tired , she remembered him saying over the phone. But how long could he stay this tired? It didn't seem right.

"The number you are trying to reach 3-2-3-6-8-7—, "

Voicemail again. Bev dropped the phone back into her bag with a little more force than necessary.

Ben drove them the rest of the way in silence. Things went by in a blur as the two were waved into his building's parking garage and made their way through the front desk security.

Perhaps it was more lax because one of the guards knew of Beverly, said her wife had a couple Rogan-Marsh suits in their walk-in back home to which Beverly airily smiled and thanked her. Perhaps it was because the moment she stepped into the complex, her skin speckled with goosebumps and the softball in her throat was back, making it difficult to talk and even harder to breath.

It was probably because as the elevator took them to the 11th floor, she suddenly realized she was on the cusp of blacking out. She grabbed at Ben's hand and he grabbed for her right back.

"How are you?" She asked.

"Scared shitless, actually." Ben's gaze was fixed on the carpet's swirling hexagonal patterns but she knew he wasn't seeing anything. "Thanks for asking, babe."

Bev nervously giggled. "Anytime."

The elevator opened and the smile fell from her face.

Move , her brain supplied, and she did, pulling Ben with her.

It was like making her way to Mrs. Kersh's apartment all over again: one foot, then another foot, then step again, until you made it there. But with each step came apprehension, which built and built until it filled not only her chest, but her throat and her stomach, down to her toes and even in the space behind her eyes. Every part of her was electric. She felt Ben thrum with the same energy.

They stopped, side by side, hand in sweaty hand.

There was nothing to suggest that anything was wrong behind this door. On any other day Bev would be delighted to be standing here. She wouldn't have even had the chance to knock more than once before Richie would be throwing open the door to greet her with a hug. But now, hypnotized by the ruddy brass numbers tacked to the door, she couldn't bring herself to raise a hand. They just shook by her sides.

Ben pounded the side of a closed fist on the door.

"Richie?"

They agreed that it'd be polite to knock three times, then use the key. All at once she realized how quiet it was in the hallway. Ben tried again. The knocks sounded like the footfalls of giants, at least to her.

"Hey, man, it's Ben and Bev. You home?"

Use the key , something in her gut cried. *Open the door!*

Ben raised his fist to try the third time but something overcame Bev which had her nearly hip check him out of the way to shove the key in the door. It stuck when she tried to turn it. She tried again, accidentally locking it.

It was already open , she realized, unlocking it again. Why didn't that make her feel any better? She looked back to Ben, hand on the knob but not turning it. Not yet.

"When I," her voice gave out, but she would not be deterred. "When we were back in Derry... And I – the visions I had of us–,"

"I know," said Ben, softly. "But –,"

"Please don't make me check the bedroom."

His eyes widened. "You think...?"

"I have no idea," she said and pushed open the door.

The first thing she noticed was the kitchen sink running and the glass on the floor, shards of what once could have been a vodka bottle glistening against the Woodgrain like glitter on a discotheque floor. She could only guess, as the shards holding the wording *S-V-E* was barely held together by the glue on the back of the labeling.

Svedka? Bev wondered, and her nose wrinkled.

She took a few steps in, boot heels snapping on the wood like the pop of fireworks when compared to the white noise of the tap. She made her way to the sink and slowly turned it off, watching as the spout went from a stream, to dribble, to piddle to drips. Somehow, the quiet made it worse.

She winced as Ben's shoes further crushed the bits of glass into the floor as he made his way into the guest bedroom, softly repeating Rich's name.

"Richie?" Bev called. "Honey, are you home?"

All the lights in the apartment were off, but there was still visibility thanks to the setting sun and open bay window curtains. She flicked on the overhead, almost letting out a scream when she accidentally activated the garbage disposal instead. But when she found the right switch, lighting up the kitchen and casting a glow into the adjoining dining area, she did scream, letting out a gasp of "FUCK" so loud that Ben came running.

A neat palm print of blood was stamped into the counter top.

In the twilight, it had blended in with the dark of the granite but now, in the light, it gleamed with a wet freshness that made Bev's stomach swoop. She only move when Ben tugged her away from it, yelling louder, "Richie, man, if you're home this isn't funny!"

But this wasn't a joke, Bev knew. At least, not one that Richie would pull. He pushed things sometimes, took them too far, but was never malicious about it. Not to his friends.

"Bedroom," she mumbled, just loud enough for Ben to hear. "The main bedroom."

Her eyes flicked to the hallway on her right, the one she walked right past when they'd come in. Directly down it, if they didn't turn, was the bathroom at the dead-end of the L-shape. Down it half way and to the right was a small walk-in. But where the L crooked, it lead into the master bedroom. She had only been there once before, drunk off her ass, right after she'd filed to leave Tom.

The thought of crying into Richie's arms, asking him if she was a fuck up for staying with a carbon-copy of her father after all those years, flew across Bev's memory. Another thought came hot on its tail: *Wouldn't it be fucked up if both times you saw Richie's bedroom, you were crying?* The voice sounded like her father. Or maybe her ex. *Only this time, it's because –*

Ben bolted down the hallway, yelling Richie's name.

She moved to follow, but stopped, mesmerized by the glow of light that crept from the inch of space between the door and the floor of the master bath. Her gut and brain seemed to finally be on the same page. She and Ben reached the door at the same time, he having flown back from the bedroom, breathlessly telling Bev, "he's not in there."

Not looking at Ben, not looking at him unless she wanted to lose her nerve, she put her hand to the door and pushed. It creaked open partway, then thudded, blocked from opening completely. It was ajar enough for her to slip through the gap.

She wished she hadn't.

"Oh my god," she shrieked, spinning away from the sight. "*BEN!*"

But the damage was done. Even as she clapped her hands over her eyes, rubbing them and smearing the make up into the grooves of her

face as a consequence, the image would never be gone. Ben reached for her, pulling her back into the hallway before pushing into the bathroom himself.

He stilled. She could see him through a hazy gaze as her eyes filled with tears.

“Fuck,” he said, voice cracking. “Bev, we gotta – oh holy Christ –,”

Ben dropped to the floor and she knew what he was crawling to. Knew and couldn’t comprehend. Or, could, but didn’t want to. Because Richie was on the other side of that door, body blocking it partially as he lay half slumped on the ground haloed by a puddle of his own sick. But it was his eyes that got her: blown so wide that the brown was almost completely eclipsed.

She thought of Richie in the Deadlights and realized it was exactly the way he looked now. Almost the same, except now, he –

Don’t . If she didn’t think it, didn’t say it, it wouldn’t come true. *Just don’t* .

“Bev! Bev call 911.”

But like she was at the front door, her body was again rooted to the spot. Whether it was because of fear or disbelief or denial – she didn’t know. She didn’t care. Fuck, was she hyperventilating? Her thoughts flitted to Eddie, then, and the dam almost broke. She couldn’t cry, though. She wouldn’t cry. If she started crying that made it real, and it wasn’t, it— Bev clapped a hand over mouth, breaths coming in ragged gasps.

Eddie knew, she thought . *He knew somehow from all those miles away and we just—*

We’re what? Busy? She could have screamed again.

What was the last thing she said to Richie? Was it about the stupid Christmas party? Was the last thing she said to him fucking small talk? Like he ranked no higher than the mail person or a grocery store cashier, in terms of closeness, asking you how your day went and you only half answered. A childhood friendship, a death-match

survival with an inter-dimensional being, only to be ended by a phone call with the emotional significance of a 'how-do-you-do' nod to someone you recognized on the street.

"Beverly, NOW," Ben roared. "He's – he's *breathing* ! He's awake!"

It was the verbal cattle prod she needed, scrambling back to her purse. It was still draped on the coat hooks bolted to the wall where she left it when they entered. Bev yanked it free, upending it on the floor. Lipstick tubes and coins rolled every which way as she sifted through the trash, thinking *and why the FUCK do I have so many stupid pieces of paper in this thing ?*

She dialed emergency services and, through choked breaths, told them what she knew which was largely nothing – except her childhood friend turned recent divorce therapist was possibly choking to death in his own chunks and she couldn't say why or how.

Did he take anything?

I don't know .

Sure she'd noticed pills thrown across the tile, reminding Beverly of half-melted Skittles crushed into a theater's floor after a sold out movie. The medicine cabinet was open and most of the shit had fallen out, so maybe they just fell and the bottle popped open as a result. But did he take them?

I don't know .

There was also the bloody palm print which could have been caused from the smashed bottle, but she hadn't looked at his wrists or anywhere else. Thighs, arms, wrists, his stomach – she hadn't looked anywhere else. Nowhere but his brow-black eyes and blue, blue lips. Even now it was all she could think about as she answered the operator's questions. So were the cuts self-inflicted?

I don't know .

"And what's your relation to the victim, ma'am?" The operator asked. Her voice sounded confident but bored and Bev wondered, in this neighborhood, if a potential celebrity suicide was just another day for

her.

Bev stopped herself from giving the knee-jerk response of *I don't know*, but it crossed her mind anyways.

“Ma’am?” She prompted again. “What’s your relationship?”

Did they have one? Did they even anymore? Two weeks ago she wouldn’t have hesitated to scream best friend or hell, even brother. Now—

“I’m his emergency contact,” Bev choked out, then quieter said, “He’s my – we’re... friends.”

She didn’t know if the operator heard her, having told her that an ambulance would be there shortly and to stay on the line. Following the woman’s instructions would have been the rational thing to do. It would have been the sane, smart thing to do. But Beverly’s animal brain was chanting for her to call Eddie and her breaking heart needed someone to share this pain with, so that’s what she did. Her shaking fingers selected Eddie’s number from her contacts.

It only rang once. Maybe not even a full ring.

“Bev?” He was breathless, like he had been waiting for her call. “Bevvie?”

She could hear Ben attempting CPR in the other room, telling Richie to focus and to stay awake. Someone, maybe Richie, groaned. Would it help?

I don’t know.

“I—,” but there wasn’t anything to say, and even if there was, she wouldn’t know how to say it. So instead of giving him an answer, her breath hitched. And each time she tried again to speak her throat clicked in a way that dug grief’s knife deeper into her voice box until the only thing left to do was cry.

It was the only sound she could make, and boy, did she make it. She made it real loud.

Notes for the Chapter:

Bev and Ben find Richie blacked out in his home from drinking too much. There are pills scattered on the bathroom floor and they find blood near the kitchen sink. They are unsure if any, or all of these facts, have something to do with the state of Richie. Again -- I promise this will get brighter and we will see happy things! We've just got to get over this plot hump first. And as always, if you see something: Say something! I beta my own work but sometimes I miss things. Please let me know if there's any errors and I'll correct them. But don't forget to drop a review about what you think of the story, too!

10. Chapter 10

Despite a lifetime of coddling from his mother, and later his soon-to-be-ex wife, Eddie had actually almost drowned once. Even overbearing love, it seemed, was incapable of completely turning him into *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*, despite everyone's best intentions.

His sophomore year of college he'd been talked into road tripping to Michigan during winter break with his roommates and a handful of their fraternity brothers. Why Michigan, he couldn't fucking remember. Something about someone's family having a cottage in the Upper Peninsula and Eddie having never been ice fishing before. For once, Eddie was included in a group of boys who weren't looking to make him the butt of the joke and that was all that really mattered at the time.

(Years later, he'd realized he'd already had that group of friends, but in the moment, it was more freeing than growing wings and learning to fly.)

What he could remember of that trip though was how standing out in the middle of frozen Lake Superior, looking around at nothing but miles of ice, made him feel like R.J. MacReady right out of *The Thing*. How if you didn't cover your face, the wind hurt like a slap and made your lashes freeze your eyes shut if you closed them for too long. How if you weren't mindful, thin ice could form over someone's previously used shanty hole and one wrong step could be your last.

Even if Eddie was offered a million dollars to try, he couldn't be forced to remember a single one of those boys' names. One of them might have been Dan, but it was such a bland name that any one of them, hell, even all of them, could have been named Dan.

What he could remember was the swooping feeling in his guts as he fell through the ice. How, when the water soaked through his snowsuit in seconds, his brain was convinced he was being stabbed everywhere and anywhere, both inside and out. He remembered trying to scream, only to swallow a mouthful of water and his head going dizzy as he realized he could die. He remembered thrashing, but the weight of his coat holding him down. He remembered that

when the boys pulled him out – and to their credit, it had only been a minute, maybe even less, that Eddie spent underwater – his only thoughts had been: *If this is what it's like to know you're going to die, I want to go out in my sleep .*

Nothing since had been more painful: Not crashing his car or breaking his arm or, shit, getting stabbed in the face came close but it truly wasn't anything to compare. Falling into that Lake Superior water made every cell in his body think it was dying and that all he could do was freeze and feel it. Feel it as his muscles contracted to conserve warmth while his brain screamed: *Swim! Swim you stupid idiot .*

But he had frozen. Was frozen. Maybe even still frozen to this day.

Beverly tried to speak into the phone, tried again and again but her voice kept failing. As she did, Eddie remembered the pain of nearly drowning and the knives in his skin and the fear of possibly dying. As he remembered, he thought to himself that *that* pain, almost a lifetime ago, wasn't really pain. He had no conceptualization of what real pain was, because he had been shielded from it his whole life.

Because if he knew then what he felt now – a feeling in his heart so enormous it all but pushed his consciousness out of his body, making him look down on the situation like this was one dramatic Lifetime film and he was the star – he would have realized he didn't know pain. This was a pain that if he felt its full brunt, he knew his brain would implode, that his heart would give out and his soul would evaporate; that if he let himself cry now, he wouldn't stop until he choked and, even then, it wouldn't be enough to get all the emotions out.

It was a pain that shut him down. It left him blank. And he had to be – because if Eddie was anything else in that moment, he'd be dead. That was it. Plain and simple.

The thought didn't even shock him because, before Pennywise, that's how it had always been. Wherever Richie went, Eddie followed, and visa versa. It was the natural order to things: like the winter needed snow and like the beach needed waves, Eddie needed Richie. And if Richie needed him right now, then that's exactly where Eddie would

be, whether Richie wanted it or not.

Once confident that Beverly was OK – as much as she could be – Eddie told her he was buying the next flight out. He shushed over her frantic questions of where he would stay and how he could afford something like this on such short notice with a firm “We’ll worry about it later.”

Well, now was later.

Eddie shifted in his small airline seat, grateful no one else was in his row. He didn’t know if he could handle someone encroaching on his personal space right now, considering he was already trying not to freak about how gross airlines were all on their own.

And also considering ...

After he hung up on Beverly, the levee holding in all the confidence he exuded over the phone let out of him. His knees buckled, taking him down to the wood of his kitchen floor. For a moment, he wished for his inhaler all over again, but it was only a fleeting thought which was taken over by one more powerful: *You’re braver than you think* .

That was the sentiment, echoing around his head in Richie’s voice, that got him back to his feet. He staggered around his apartment in a daze, grabbing fistfuls of anything he could out of his closet and shoving them into a mid-sized carry-on. Did they match? How long should he pack for? What about toiletries, sleep-clothes, underwear? Gun to his head now, he couldn’t say what exactly was in the bag except clothes. It was a wonder he was even sitting on this plane – he hadn’t even remembered to buy a ticket until he was in the Uber, halfway to JFK.

The adrenaline was wearing off now, reality coming down on him hard like he had withdrawals. Eddie could feel sweat bead on his upper lip. *Had* Richie tried to... *do* something? Or was this just an accident, stumbled upon by Bev and Ben because of some weird sixth sense Eddie had? Even still – what if he got there and it was all for nothing, because despite his intervening and despite their best intentions, Richie was –

“First time flying?”

Eddie looked up, wild-eyed. An older woman across the aisle gave him a sympathetic smile. Then he realized, based on the cock of her brow, she was waiting for some sort of response – which was harder than expected, considering Eddie had worked himself up so badly just then that his throat closed.

“No actually, I uh, I fly all the time. For work.”

God why were his palms sweating too? Was it a million degrees on this plane? Eddie wiped his hands on his thighs, the roughness of the jeans doing nothing to sop up the sweat.

“Oh?” The tone of her voice was that of someone wanting to spend the entirety of the flight talking, which was more Eddie’s idea of hell than anything else. “Is that where you’re going now? What do you work as?”

“I’m a risk analyst,” said Eddie, because yeah he might be annoyed but his mother had beat social niceties into him as much as she had germophobia. “But this isn’t – I’m not going out for work. Personal... personal trip.”

Take the hint, grandma .

Her lips curled into a knowing smile, but what she thought she knew, Eddie couldn’t have fucking guessed. He wished he’d brought a book or snagged a magazine from one of the overpriced kiosks dotting the departures gates. Anything to hide his face and physically signal he wanted this conversation over.

Eddie flagged over a stewardess and asked if it was too late to tack on in-flight wifi to his bill.

“Whoever she is, she’s a lucky woman,” the woman across the aisle said as Eddie watched the attendant leave with his card.

“Excuse me?”

“Whoever you’re going to see – I remember when my husband and I tried long distance,” her eyes looked charmingly starry and, were this

any other time, Eddie might have stopped to appreciate time-tested love. “It was always the best when he would fly in overnight and surprise me in the morning with-,”

“I don’t – I’m visiting a friend. He’s in the hospital,” God, did all nosy people fly Delta after midnight? She at least had the good sense to look chastised. “We don’t know if...”

While the idea had fluttered around his mind, he hadn’t given voice to the possibility until now. *He could die. I could get there and he could be* — Eddie’s mouth became very dry.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie mumbled, standing. Whether the apology was to her, Richie or God itself he didn’t know.

If he couldn’t even think the possibility, why did he ever think he could say it?

His stomach rolled and he made a dash for the nearest bathroom, ignoring a call from the stewardess that the seat belt light had yet to turn off. Finding the cubicle unoccupied, Eddie threw the door open and thanked god for small miracles as he spit up whatever was formerly in his stomach into the sink. Hardly anything came out, but that didn’t stop him from dry heaving until security came by and asked if he needed medical assistance.

Eddie made something up about vertigo and put an order in for ginger ale.

Upon arriving back to his seat, he pulled his luggage from the overhead and found some Xanax still left over from a trip he and Myra took to Jamaica a few years back. *Xanax doesn’t expire, right ?* For once, he found himself not caring as he took them. A card with the wif’s username and password had been left on his chair. Before he shut his eyes, he punched the info into his phone and typed out a message to Ben about where and when he would be at LAX.

Just as he started to drift, he heard the woman again.

“I’m so sorry I upset you, honey. I – I didn’t realize.”

All Eddie could mumble back was, “we didn’t either,” though he was

sure he didn't make any sense.

It took a minute spot Ben's Jeep when Eddie stepped out of arrivals. He blamed it a little on switching time zones and a lot on the xan. The fact it was still pitch black out threw him for a loop too, expecting sunlight but realizing, after a moment, he theoretically just traveled back in time.

If he wasn't so tired, he'd laugh. He'd probably laugh if he was more tired, too. But as it stood he was just the amount of tired that made his skull ache like there was too much air kept in the oversized balloon he called his head and feet throb like he'd just run miles. Ben didn't look much better from what Eddie could see while chucking his roller bag and backpack into the back seat. He wouldn't be surprised if Ben hadn't slept at all.

The second Eddie's butt was in the passenger, Ben crushed him into a hug over the console. For a moment, all they could do was hold one another in the same way they did in the quarry all those months ago. But then the car behind them honked and the spell was broken. Ben gave a watery laugh, Eddie casting a withering glance behind them.

"Some people," he said.

"Yeah," Ben sniffed, eyes glassy. "Some people."

After a beat, Eddie realized Bev wasn't present. Ben must have noticed Eddie's confused look, as he sighed and told him: "She's still at the hospital."

"How's she holding up?" As much as Eddie was worried about Richie, he was worried about Ben and Bev too. *They must be running on fumes*

“She’s... alright. You know,” he cleared his throat, “considering.”

“And you?”

“Been... better.”

They tried to make small talk for a bit as Ben navigated out of the airport, but it fell flat quickly. There was only one thing Eddie was interested in and they both knew it.

“Richie... He’s – is he–,”

He watched as a muscle in Ben’s jaw twitched. Though his eyes were fixed on the road ahead, Ben’s gaze was a million miles away. It made Eddie’s chest tighten. He knew it wasn’t on purpose, but sometimes Eddie cursed Ben’s want to think over his words, to have them mean exactly what he wanted them to say, rather than just blurt them out.

Like Richie .

“He’s in stable condition,” Ben said after a moment. “But–,”

“But what? You can’t just keep me in suspen–,”

“They’re not sure if it was an accident or suicide.”

Eddie thought back to nearly drowning in Lake Michigan for the second time that day and realized; the cold which spread through his chest now was more frigid than any winter lake water. *Suicide* . He couldn’t breathe. *Suicide* . Not Richie – not vibrant, loud, in your face, teeming with life

(It’s easier this way.

I’m sorry, I really am.)

Richie Tozier.

Ben’s hand on his arm brought Eddie back to the present.

“You gotta breath, man.”

Eddie hadn't even realized he'd stopped. He let out an exhale which sounded more like a sob than he'd like to admit. What else could he possibly have expected though? From Bev's call she made it sound like he was dying. *Dead* . But Richie wasn't, he couldn't be–

“Why–,” Eddie's voice gave out, but he tried again, “Why do they think...?”

“His BAC, uh... I wasn't there when they told Bev, but she texted me that apparently it was something like point-five one.”

Even for a tall man like Richie, that could have been lethal. Was supposed to be lethal. Eddie resisted the urge to scream in frustration. Didn't he know? He was a grown ass man – didn't he know the risk that came with drinking so much? Sure, everyone had their phase in college or high school, but they got over it. They grew up, wised up. Didn't he know –

“It wasn't... that wasn't all, though,” Ben said, and Eddie felt his stomach sink. “They found pills. In his system. A lot of fuckin' sleeping pills, Eddie.”

Ben wasn't much for cursing, so if he was already dropping F-bombs before 9 a.m. then what he had seen was bad. How bad, Eddie didn't want to know. Or rather, didn't want to, but knew he had to. *I didn't fly across the country to pussy out now* , Eddie thought, at the same time something in the back of his mind whispered, *braver than you think* .

“He– Richie OD'd?”

Ben gave a jerky nod. “Whether accidentally or on purpose, we won't know until he wakes up.”

Eddie sat on his hands to stop them from shaking. It didn't make a damn difference.

Where had it gone wrong? What happened? Who was this Richie, wearing the face and using the voice of a friend Eddie thought he'd known so well? And hell – Richie had gone out of his way for so

many months to avoid Eddie like he was diseased. Would Richie even want to see him when he woke up? *If* he –

Eddie stopped that train before it even left the station. Richie would wake up. He had to. And when he did, Eddie was going to give him a piece of his mind.

They drove in silence for a little while longer, stuck in the morning workflow traffic. When close to forty minutes had passed without a sound from either them or the radio, Ben finally broke the spell, asking Eddie where he wanted to go.

“I figure you’d might want to go to ours and shower, since, you know, airlines are pretty gross even when you’re not a mega freak about germs,” Ben said, smiling slightly when Eddie mumbled an “Oh, fuck off,” at him. “But I didn’t know if you wanted to see Rich first, or...,”

There wasn’t any choice: Of course he wanted to see Richie, needed to see him. But taking one look at Ben, who looked like he’d aged 10 years over night, Eddie knew it would have to wait. *Only a few hours*, he told himself, *Richie isn’t going anywhere. He’ll be OK. He’s going to be OK.*

It wasn’t like he could just show up in Emergency either with his suitcase in tow.

“You haven’t slept at all, have you?”

Ben made a halfhearted grumble and shrugged his shoulders. There was also the case of Bev. Eddie assumed she was probably worse for wear than Ben, who looked like at any moment he’d forget to break and rear-end the Tesla in front of them.

“Go get Bev and go home,” Eddie said, “take a nap or something. You really look like shit.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

“No, I’m serious. You’ve almost hit this asshole in front of us twice and the last thing we need is for us to end up in the hospital too.”

“You don’t have a car, how would you get–,”

Eddie snorted. “Uber? Lyft? Literally any of the ninety-million different taxi services your Silicon Valley assholes have come up with?”

It wasn’t like he was worried about the money. Since Myra, all he’d done is hoard his paychecks in the bank. What didn’t go to rent, food, or the attorney went into savings – and since there wasn’t someone there constantly dipping into it for luxury vacations or high-end clothing, it had filled up quite nicely. Or rather sadly, depending on how Eddie was feeling that day.

Glass half empty, glass half full.

Ben pursed his lips, mulling over what he was going to say. Eddie cut him off before he reached that pass.

“Take me to Richie’s apartment.”

That, clearly, was not what Ben expected him to say. “Eddie, I don’t think–,”

“No, I do know what I think I’m talking about and I want you to take me there,” he said. “You have a spare key, yeah? It’d save you time trying to ferry my ass to your apartment, go back to the hospital to pick up Bev, and then take me back there again. Plus, like I said, you look like shit, man. You really need to sleep and –,”

“How do you have so much energy,” Ben mumbled. “You were on a plane for six hours.”

“Exactly. I had time to sleep.” It was better if, given the circumstances, Ben didn’t know it was drug induced.

“It’s not clean.”

“It’s Richie, I don’t expect it to be–,”

“No, I mean...,” Ben stopped, both hands clenched tight to the steering wheel. For a moment, Eddie wondered if all newfound muscles stacked on Ben gave him the ability to rip it in half like the

Hulk. "His apartment, when we got there... It was– we didn't–,"

Oh. He hadn't stopped to consider that Richie might have made a mess, not just from living his daily life but –

"We haven't gotten the chance to clean it up, yet," Ben said. "It's still... pretty messy."

Eddie's mouth moved faster than he could think.

"Then let me do it." He was only slightly surprised by the conviction in his own voice. "You go get Bev. I'll do it."

"I thought you hated messes."

The memory of cleaning Bev's bathroom came back to Eddie, then. The boy who had gone on and on about somehow getting AIDS through a hangnail on a subway dropped to his hands and knees to scrub literal blood out of bathroom tiles for a girl he'd only met that summer. Because they were friends. And yes, there had been some complaining, but he wouldn't be Eddie without a little complaining and a lot of cherry-picked medical statistics.

"It's not a mess when it's your friends," said Eddie.

He was sure Ben was thinking about that day, too, if his wistful smirk was anything to go off of. He sighed as he flicked on the right blinker to get off the freeway. Even though Eddie had never seen Richie's apartment, he knew that's where they were going. Again, that pull he felt in his heart flared. This was the right direction, right decision.

"Even if I say no, it's not gonna matter, is it?"

"Probably not," said Eddie. "And besides... he's gotta come back to his own apartment eventually, and I don't want him to– well..."

Sure, he didn't know what he was signing up for – but when did he ever? With the Losers, it was always a grab bag of either terror or frustration. At least this time, though frustration was still there, it fell into the realm of caused-by-human-error rather than the supernatural.

A quiet fell over them again as they transitioned from freeway to city. Eddie watched as they passed buses and buildings and people all awash with the glow of the new morning sun, which had colored the sky a hazy pink. This had to be a dream. There was no other way he'd fallen asleep in New York and woken up in California. There was no way he hadn't had a complete and total break down yet.

Yet . There was still time, after all.

Ben cleared his throat again.

"How did you know?"

"Hm?" Eddie tore his gaze from the window. His brows furrowed. "Know what?"

"When you called Bev... It was like you knew. Like you knew something was wrong."

Maybe there was something supernatural to it: Eddie and Richie had been holding hands, after all, that fateful day Bill cut their palms and made them swear the Oath. Perhaps the magic which ran through Derry had tied their fates together. Or maybe there was nothing poetic about it at all, just good old fashioned intuition.

"I don't know," whispered Eddie, scared to put a name to it. "I just felt... something."

"Something?"

"You ever just have that feeling? When you know what's the right decision, even if it doesn't make sense? Like things just... ,"

"Worked out for you?" Ben supplied. "Yeah. Strangely, I know the feeling."

Eddie nodded. Perhaps he wasn't the only one affected by Derry's magic. They all had turned out wildly successful in their own ways: author, architect, fashion designer. Even he and Stan, who did admittedly end up with the more mundane of job titles between the seven of them, were rising stars in their fields – sought after by companies and making more money than they knew what to deal

with.

Or, in Stan's case, made , Eddie thought grimly. His stomach jumped.

If they were successful by way of magically knowing the right decisions to make in their career fields, it couldn't be outside the realm of possibility that they were blessed in other ways. Ways like magically knowing when to make that phone call high would save a friend's life? Perhaps. It wasn't the weirdest thing that had happened to them. Not by half.

"I can't explain it," Eddie shrugged, "but that's what it was."

They pulled down a side street and slowed to a stop. Eddie peered out the window, unsure which building was Richie's but knowing they were here. Ben flicked on the Jeep's hazards.

"C'mon," he said, stepping out of the car. "Let me take you inside."

Eddie followed in suit, grabbing for his backpack. When he went for the roller, Ben waved him off and pulled it out himself.

He helped usher Eddie through security, which this time around was decidedly slower as Eddie had never been inside and wasn't on Richie's auto-admit list like Ben and Bev were. When the last I was dotted and the last T crossed, Ben showed him to the elevator.

Before he stepped in and pressed 11, he handed Eddie a silver key with a piece of white tape tacked to the head, the number "46" scrawled in pen across it. He also gave Eddie two simple instructions: "Don't lose it and try not to lock yourself out. Rich is the only one with the other key."

"You're not coming up?" Eddie asked, holding the door as Ben stepped off.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, man, but I — I can't right now, I...,"

Eddie understood, but it didn't stop him from mentally giving Ben the middle finger. He brought Eddie all the way to the mouth lions den, after all. The least he could do was see him to the lion itself.

"I'll call," Eddie said, letting go of the door-open button as the elevator began to buzz angrily, "when I'm at the hospital."

Ben nodded. "We'll need some sort of plan, moving forward."

Plan ? But then Eddie understood: A plan to figure out what went wrong, and where. A plan to stop this from happening again. A plan to be there for Richie.

Before he could open his mouth, the doors snapped shut, leaving Eddie alone with his luggage.

The elevator went up.

Notes for the Chapter:

I was debating combining this and the next chapter together, as it feels rude to write filler after a chapter like that -- but now we're all in the same place! And this probably means two chapters this week! As always, thank you so much for your kind words. I really appreciate the feedback and having people point out what works or doesn't for them in chapters. More soon!

11. Chapter 11

He wasn't quite sure what he expected Richie's apartment to look like, but it wasn't this.

As kids, from what Eddie could remember, Richie's room was like the aftermath of a storm. There was a path from the door to the bed and from the bed to the closet, but that was the only visible patch of moss-green carpeting Eddie had seen. The rest of the floor could have been a completely different color and he'd have no idea.

Richie's walls were no different. What wasn't covered by a poster had some combination of ripped out comic or magazine pages, Polaroid photos, or drawings they had done as a group. If there was wallpaper in that room, Eddie never remembered seeing the color or print of it.

But while it was messy, it had its own rhyme and reason. Richie, despite his tendency to run every which way and generate a manic energy, always knew exactly where something was in his mess. It was cozy. Lived in. There was something undeniably Richie about his bedroom, which made stepping inside feel like Eddie had been let into a world of his friend's making.

This apartment, though beautiful, was cold. Literally and figuratively. Eddie shivered as he went to double check the number on the door to make sure he hadn't stumbled into the wrong one. He knew, to some degree, the apartment wouldn't be the same as Richie's childhood bedroom: For one, he was a 40-something year old man who entertained guests.

Probably.

There was to be some expectation that Richie's home would be a bit more grown up than the last place Eddie remembered him living. But still, he expected... *something*. Whether it be framed artwork of superheroes or vintage movie posters, he didn't know. Hell, even action figures on the shelves like bookend decorations would have been very much Richie's purview.

The room which Eddie stood in now, slightly shocked, looked more

like something out of an IKEA display than anything he'd associated with Richie. It felt sterile. Unlived in.

Maybe it's just because he's on tour so much.

Eddie rolled his bag through the foyer, careful to avoid the sparkle of broken glass scattered throughout the kitchen and front hall. If he looked closely, Eddie could see the tread of where the gurney had wheeled through. He looked away.

Spotting what he assumed was the guest bedroom, Eddie stepped over another explosion of debris -- this one looked to be the remains of a lowball glass, some brown liquid still left in the cradle of its base -- and chucked his things to the floor. His skin itched for a shower, but he didn't see a pint; not if he still had this mess to pick up.

He shucked out of his zip-up, bare arms ripped with goosebumps as the chill air of the apartment struck him in his tee-shirt. Eddie ran over a mental checklist of things he'd need: Broom, dustpan, gloves (a possibility), bleach, a mop... would Richie even have all of those things? If the house was any indication, bucking the notion Eddie had built up in his head of the other man, then possibly.

Finding most of what he needed in the front hall's coat closet, Eddie got to work. The glass only took minutes to sweep into its own little quarantined bag and the blood he spotted on the countertop just took a bit of elbow grease and a lot of Eddie gritting his teeth. He was right about Richie not having any rubber gloves (shocker) but wrong about him not having bleach (a genuine surprise). At least, in theory, it mean he'd cleaned his house.

At least once , Eddie told himself, nose wrinkling as he thought about how dangerous it was to be cleaning blood without gloves. *At least* . He shoved a couple extra plastic grocery bags he'd found under the sink into his back pocket just in case -- but for what, he didn't know. While down there he'd also found the empty bottles, which lead him to finding the full bottles too -- all of which went immediately into the trash. When he found the pills, they'd go in the garbage as well.

With the kitchen done in less than twenty minutes, Eddie took the chance to survey the rest of Richie's apartment. Ben had made it

sound like there was more and he wasn't the kind to become freaked out over some glass and blood like Eddie could be.

Maybe he wasn't just talking about the physical mess though. Maybe he saw something you couldn't even dream of.

It put Eddie on edge. He crept down the hall toward what looked like was a bathroom, acting as if any minute, someone would burst through the front door and accuse him of being a burglar. *And stealing what? This roll of paper towels?* It was a childish thought, but the oppressive silence of the apartment made him think it nonetheless. And to be fair -- he was an intruder here. Richie hadn't invited him; Eddie had invited himself.

What if he doesn't want to see you? He didn't want to talk to you. What if you came all this way and --

"He wouldn't," said Eddie, though he didn't know to whom.

Reaching the end of the hall, Eddie pushed the bathroom door open more and clicked on the light. Mouth dry, he clicked it back off again. He clenched his eyes shut.

That was vomit and those were pills-- there were pills on the floor, and holy shit was there glass in there? Glass on the floor glass in the bathroom? Glass in both places, had to be brought from one site to another, and blood? Oh god, did I see blood? With the vomit and the pills and the glass and the vomit and the pills and--

Eddie's thoughts whirled, the tormenting chant of *glass vomit pills-glass vomit pills-glass vomit pills-glass vomit pills* ringing his brain like a crown of thorns, digging in its barbs as it kept repeating *glass vomit pills-glass vomit pills-glass vomit pills*.

"Be brave," Eddie whispered, breathing through his nose. He tightened his grip on the paper towels. "You're brave. You *have* to be brave for --,"

His heart ached but he pulled the plastic bags out of his back pocket and opened his eyes. Turning back on the bathroom light, Eddie surveyed the scene. Just like with the apartment, he didn't know

what to expect but it *definitely* wasn't this.

When Ben said they weren't sure if Richie was trying to take his own life, Eddie pictured maybe a spilled bottle of pills on the bathroom counter or an ambiguous note tacked to the breakfast bar. He didn't picture for things to be so *messy* . The Lifetime Originals Eddie pretended not to watch when Myra put them on really gave him a warped perspective of things like these, he supposed.

Sue me .

He couldn't sweep the pills or the small shards of glass with the sick still slopping the floor so Eddie set to work on that first. Wearing two plastic bags over his hands like oven mitts, Eddie scrubbed at the tiles until the roll was whittled down to the cardboard. Even when the last of the vomit faded, he kept scrubbing. Like Bev with the blood, Eddie could still see it there, though truly it was gone.

When he finally stood, knees aching from being crouched for so long, the thought returned to Eddie: *How did it get this bad? How did we not see it?* He swept up the rest of the mess as he pondered it in silence. Once finished, he gathered all the miscellaneous garbage baggies he'd acquired and put them in one, bigger garbage bag. Eddie left it by the front door as a reminder to pitch it when leaving. The last thing Richie needed was to have that anywhere in his home.

Though his skin was screaming for a shower at this point, Eddie took it upon himself to do one last sweep of the apartment. *Just in case* , he thought to himself, knowing it was only a half-hearted excuse for snooping. Half-hearted as the only room left he hadn't explored, except for the half-bath next to the guest, was Richie's bedroom. But could it count as snooping if there was no door to the room and the hallway just opened up into it?

What kind of psycho sleeps in a room with no door ? Apparently the kind he begrudgingly found hot. Go figure.

Richie's room wasn't much different than the rest of the house, having that same museum-like feeling. It made Eddie sad in a way he couldn't put a finger on. Maybe he thought the bedroom would be different, the one place where Richie would feel free to be himself --

just like how it was when they were kids. Their bedrooms, like the clubhouse, were safe zones. It was the one place where they seldom had to worry about being interrupted in their own little world or had to fear visits from Bowers, other bullies, or even It.

All that was here, now, was a bed and a television mounted over a dresser. Over the bed was some artsy stock photo of Paris. Had Richie ever even fucking been to France? Eddie blew out a laugh, realizing that if Richie hadn't and he only bought it to be pretentious, that it was probably the most on-brand thing Richie owned in this apartment.

Eddie turned to leave but a small bookshelf, dark wood and tucked into the corner, caught his eye. It was stocked full, packed facing every which way, with books almost falling out with how bursting it was. Except for the bottom shelf it seemed. That same tug Eddie felt in his chest, which urged him to call Beverly what felt like a life time ago, surfaced again. But instead of bringing dread along with it, the tug brought a feeling of warmth.

You've already come this far, he thought, what's a little more intrusion into Richie's personal and private matters ?

It wasn't empty like Eddie initially thought. There, innocuously sat, was an old and but flimsy looking latched box. The rusted clasp wasn't closed all the way, Eddie not even sure if that was possible due to the age of the iron, had he no doubt that if he wanted to he could push it open. But did he want to? That felt like too big a breach. Still... he'd felt like he'd seen it before, somehow.

Eddie found himself crouching down before it with his hands outstretched. Nothing magical happened when he touched it. (Not that he had expected it, but was prepared for the possibility anyways. That shit just seemed to happen with them.) He thumbed at the clasp. A bit of rust flaked off, crumbling like fish food.

Where have I seen this before? The scratches on the lid seemed to suggest the box hadn't been taken care of in its lifetime. *Why do I feel like I've seen this before?* It didn't look very valuable either, so it wasn't like it could have been a family heirloom. It struck Eddie as something a kid would have purchased from a resale shop or gotten

from the Salvation Army.

Something a kid would have bought...

“Oh, shit,” Eddie breathed, realization hitting him.

He pulled open the lid, not thinking any more of Richie’s privacy. Because it wasn’t Richie’s box -- or rather, wasn’t just Richie’s box: It was Eddie’s too. It was all of theirs, them Losers. Inside, clumsily carved with either an Exacto or a penknife were the words: T R E A S U E R P I L E, with the misspelling crossed out in permanent marker by someone else and spelled correctly.

Eddie couldn’t help but snort. There was no doubt Richie must have lifted this from the clubhouse when Mike brought them down there -- but when? And why? There wasn’t much, if anything, of value he could see was in it: an incomplete deck of cards, some loose change, a cassette case of *Born In The U.S.A.* with no tape inside, bits of ripped paper that had long since lost their words to the passage of time.

It was all junk. Lovingly coveted junk from a simpler time, but junk nevertheless. Eddie wrinkled his nose, thinking of the mold or wood rot that might be lurking in the box and its materials. It had sat outside for the better part of two decades, after all. He was ready to close the lid when something -- a face -- stopped him.

It was *his* face, no more than 13-years-old, which stared back at him from a photo strip. But there were more: Bev, Bill, Mike, Richie -- and *Stan* . It was *them* , all of them. Losers together. Forever. And thanks to the preservation of the photos, they could be, if only for that moment.

Eddie’s finger traced Stan’s small but mischievous grin, heart pulling at the thought of a boy who looked like he’d rather be anywhere else but secretly was so glad to be included. All of their faces were stretched into cheeky little grins in the first shot. The second had them pulling faces, eyes rolling in different directions and bunny ears thrown up behind each others’ heads. The third was a mishmash of action, clearly unaware there’d be a final photo.

It seemed his younger self had known though. There he was, grinning with one squinted eye, an almost insane smile that would put the Cheshire Cat to shame. (Could he even remember the last time he'd looked that happy?) But there was little Eddie, mouth pulled to the point where it looked like his face would split in two. And right next to him as always was Richie: pressed so close to Eddie's younger self that their cheeks mashed together. His eyes were closed but, unlike Eddie, the smile on his face was soft -- almost serene.

All these years later, Eddie wanted to say he could remember that day. He wanted to say he could remember the moment, the elation, of having all his friends pressed into the arcade's photo booth so tightly he could touch all of them at once. But whether that memory was lost still from Derry's magic, or lost naturally to the passage of time, Eddie couldn't say. He couldn't place that day, that moment.

He could, however, place the feeling: warmth, safety, security. *Love* . It was one that hadn't really changed all these years later. He flipped the photostrip over, hoping to maybe find a date or a note -- some context for the memory.

There in pen though was only a poorly scribbled heart. Who drew it, Eddie hadn't the faintest clue. (Ben, maybe? He always was a hopeless romantic.) Eddie flipped the strip back over and stared a while longer, stared until his knees began to ache from kneeling and his eyes grew just a touch misty.

They really had been a cute group of kids who had turned out OK, all things considered. All these years later, they still had each other. And sure there were more lines on their faces, more bills to pay, more stressors to consider -- but they still had each other. They still could be like in the photos: happy, together, whole. Time couldn't change that and neither could distance.

The tears he had tried so hard to hold back since New York fell then. It started with one, then another. But like the breaking of a dike, even the smallest trickle of water could destroy the whole structure, sending everything crashing down.

And crash Eddie did. He bowed his head low, touching his forehead to the photostrip. Where had the time gone? *How did we end up here ?*

There were too many questions that life, Eddie, couldn't answer. He felt his nose dribble with snot and rubbed the back of his hand against it. The tired pulsing in his head came back and Eddie squeezed his eyes shut. It was of little use.

The tears, even if they weren't the meltdown he'd anticipated, wouldn't stop. They couldn't stop. He had kept them in for this long but he needed to let them out. Had to let them out, at least a little, or he'd explode.

He thumbed at Stan's face again, then at Richie's.

Eddie's former life, his *real* life in Derry, had come back to him in bits and pieces since stepping over the county line all those months ago. But, like the rest of them, he still couldn't remember all of it. Certain memories he had, Bill didn't. Certain things Mike could recall, Bev had no idea what he was even referencing.

But sometimes a noise, a smell, a song — something would send him back. Now crouched on Richie's bedroom floor, strip in hand, he remembered; not the time captured in the pictures, but something else.

"Do you think we'll be friends after high school?"

It was 1993. There was no way Eddie could know the following year Richie would take off without saying goodbye or that the two of them would never speak to each other for the next several decades.

That didn't matter now. What mattered was that they were sat outside the Aladdin, waiting for the clock to hit 4:30 p.m.

Eddie and Richie had a system: go up at the last possible second, precisely fourteen and a half minutes before showtime, and snag tickets. Today's venture was Jurassic Park . If they timed it just right, they could completely miss the opening trailers but score the smallest line possible for concessions.

"I'm offended ya'd even ask, m'boy," Richie said in his best Irish cop voice. It had gotten better over the years, Eddie had to admit, but it still was grating on the nerves at the best of times. "Of course we'll still be

friends, lad.”

“Yeah, but how do you know?”

Richie had gotten a car that summer and quickly it was christened the Losermobile, being used to ferry the six of them around town almost daily. Eddie’s mom hadn’t even let him apply for driver’s ed. The only crash course he’d received was in the statistics of car accidents and likelihood of accidental vehicular manslaughter.

“Eddie. C’mon,” Richie rolled his eyes. “Seriously?”

“Bev doesn’t write anymore. Doesn’t call.” She had moved to California last summer to live with her mother’s brother and his wife after Alvin Marsh was caught almost beating the life out of Bev in a Giant Eagle parking lot. If it wasn’t for the fact cops actually put him in jail, there was no doubt in Eddie’s mind any of the boys in the group would have put Alvin in the ground — Eddie included.

“Can you blame her? This place sucks harder than if Hoover Vacuum sponsored the gloryholes down at the strip clubs in South Portland.”

Eddie wrinkled his nose at Richie’s analogy, but found he really couldn’t blame Beverly. Still, that didn’t make it hurt less to be cast aside. Forgotten. He shrugged.

“Do I miss her, though?” Richie pulled a cigarette box out of his breast pocket, put a stick between his lips, and lit it. “Everyday, Eds.”

“You know how much I hate when you—,” Eddie cut himself off with a sigh. “I just... I know this place was shitty. Is shitty. But I thought— we’re friends, right? We were all friends.”

*“We **are** still all friends, spaghetti.”*

“But Bev—,”

“Look, Bev’s been through a lot. We’ve all been through a lot.” Richie ashed his cigarette out the window. “Maybe this is her way of dealing with it. Maybe this is her way of not dealing with it. I dunno, I’m not Jenny Craig or whatever.”

Eddie picked at the fraying line of thread hanging off the sleeve of his hoodie. "Jenny Craig sells weight loss supplements, dumbass."

"Or. Whatever." Richie repeated, but slower, as if Eddie didn't hear him the first time.

They lapsed into a comfortably uncomfortable silence, as they usually did. Nightranger droned on the radio. Eddie checked his watch and saw they only had five more minutes before they had to leave.

"Are you worried?"

"Huh?"

Richie flicked the rest of the cigarette out the window. "I asked if you're worried. You know, that I'd forget you?"

"Like you could." Eddie stuck out his tongue, hoping desperately for it to be true. "I'd be on your ass like white on rice if you tried."

But then Richie did something, something Eddie couldn't have expected: He smiled. That in itself wasn't unique, but it was the way Richie did and the way he looked when he did it that, for one soft moment, took Eddie's breath away. It wasn't Richie's usual toothy grin. It wasn't his mouth wide open, caught-mid-laugh smile.

It was something so precious and tiny, Eddie was afraid if anyone else were to see it, its tenderness would extinguish. For a moment in that car, it was just them. Them and Nightranger, who was busy asking the price of finding Mr. Right. (The **trashmouth** ?) Eddie's cheeks flushed.

"I'd never even let you forget me," Richie said, voice husky. "Even if you wanted to."

"Good."

"Good."

" **Good.** "

"Promise?" It was childish, but Eddie held out a pinky and looked to Richie, who looked floored in the driver's seat. "You don't have to if you

want, but --,"

Richie shook his head, practically leaping at Eddie. "I do! I do."

They wrapped pinkys around one another. Eddie looked at the swirl of all his other fingers curled up into a fist, trying to ignore the way his stomach heated with the feather-light weight of Richie's hand next to his.

"You know it's not official unless you seal it, right?" said Eddie.

Looking confused, Richie asked how that was done. With a courage Eddie didn't even know he possessed, he leaned down and pressed a delicate kiss to the middle of the side of his hand where all the fingers met. He looked back at Richie. "We have to do it at the same time," Eddie said. "Otherwise, the promise won't work."

It could have been the sun, or it could have been the angle Eddie was bent at, but it looked like Richie's face turned a startling shade of red. He almost stammered out a way to take it back, but Richie stopped him. He pulled their intertwined fingers higher so that the side of his palm, of his fist, was more level with Richie's own mouth.

Rather than complain, Eddie sat up on his knees.

"Who am I to fuck with tradition?" Richie said.

It was Eddie's turn to roll his eyes. "Exactly the kind of person, that's who."

He leaned in first to show Richie he wasn't kidding. Seconds later, Richie leaned in too, eyes half mast like he was gaming for a real smooch. Eddie's lips trembled as he made contact with his own skin. He closed his eyes as well. If he focused enough, he could feel the gentle brush of Richie's breathing across his cheeks and almost pretend this was a real kiss.

When he opened his eyes, Richie was no longer kissing his fist but staring at Eddie with eyes blown wide.

"There," Eddie said. His voice shook but he was proud words could even come out. "Now it's official."

“W-We’ve got a bond.”

Eddie nodded. “Friends forever.”

“And ever.”

Why he thought of that now, Eddie couldn’t say. He rubbed a hand against his mouth. The tears had finally stopped but the back of his nose still tingled with sniffles.

They’d made a promise. Even if he hadn’t remembered it until just now, they promised to be there for one another. He cleared his throat, looking once more at the photos in his hand.

If they were so happy then, they could be happy now, too.

Eddie put the photos back in the box and shut it, leaving the room with something in his chest he hadn’t felt since leaving New York: determination.

Riding in the backseat of a car is... weird. It wasn’t that Eddie was a stranger to rideshares, but there was always something so foreign about having someone else in a car with you while feeling almost threatened to make small talk with them. At least with a taxi, the glass partition provided some sense of distance between the driver and passenger.

Uber was a lawless land, in his opinion. After telling his driver he needed to go to the hospital, Eddie quickly cut off all questions with a terse “Yeah, can we not?” as the man began rattling off how he had a fee for vomiting, which was different than his fee for bloodstains, which was more than his fee for pissing. Thinking back to his talk with the woman on the plane -- which, had it only been earlier this morning? -- Eddie sometimes wished he could just never speak to

people again.

Nobody, except his Losers.

He pulled his phone from the kangaroo pocket of his quarter zip, still slightly wrinkled from its hasty packing. He'd tried to steam them out the poor-mans way -- leaving it and his Chinos on a hanger he found in the spare room and letting the steam of the shower press them out -- but it had been to minimal success. Well, it wasn't like he was walking into a board meeting or anything. Richie would probably laugh at him for even trying.

Eddie typed out a message to Bev that he was on his way then leaned back in his seat. The top arm of the seat belt cut into his neck. Grumbling, he sat back up. He'd slept enough on the flight anyway; no sense in making himself overtired. Peeking at the Garmin on the dash -- *and who the fuck still had and used a Garmin? Like an actual functioning Garmin?* -- it said there was still about 15 minutes or so before he arrived.

He clicked back on his phone and refreshed his email. Groupon, newsletter, newsletter, something that could wait another day or two, junk and spam. Fantastic. He clicked out of it and onto Facebook. Why Eddie had it, he had no idea -- just a guy swept up in the craze of creating one when the hype was hot, and posting only the most major of life events to it. Now, it felt like a graveyard for his past life. Hell, his profile picture was still a picture of Myra kissing him on the cheek. He clicked out of that app, too. eBooks then? Checking the Giants' score on ESPN? (*Were they even playing today?*)

Everyone knew that when a distraction was needed, emails and notifications never came. Why would now be any different? Eddie sighed. He was about to put his phone back in his pocket when it buzzed with a text from Bev. His heart leapt.

Then it turned to stone and plummeted back to earth as he read the message. The more they came, the further it sank.

>Hey, sorry for pulling this on you but I have to go. I don't know where Richie's head is at right now, but he's not listening to me. <

> He keeps saying it was an accident <

> I can't do anything to keep him in the hospital or make him talk to someone. Maybe he'll talk to you??? but he doesn't want anything to do with me <

> I'm so, so sorry Eddie. I just don't know what to do <

> If you need a place to stay our house is open to you <

Funny how fast determination could turn to dread.

The time on the dash said he'd be to the hospital in only a few more minutes. The time back to the apartment could take anywhere from twenty-five minutes to an hour with traffic. Even if he were to go back, there wasn't a guarantee it was where Richie would end up. Eddie felt like a worm squirming on the sidewalk after a rainstorm, left to fry in the sun.

Now there was only four minutes to the hospital. It seemed the choice had been made for him and he shot Bev a text saying so. Having done that, he put the phone back in his jacket pocket and waited. He thought of the pictures, he thought of the *glass vomit pills*, he thought of the pinky promise -- but mainly, he just waited, apprehensive but numb.

It felt like he'd been doing that a lot lately.

Notes for the Chapter:

Next up: Back to Richie!

12. Chapter 12

Everything ached worse than it usually did, which tipped Richie off that something was wrong.

He racked his brain for an answer but found nothing. A steady, repetitive beep sounded in the background. Had he left the television on? *Did it matter* ? Someone might have said Richie's name, but he slipped back under the warm wave of sleep, consciousness snuffed out once again.

And this time, Richie dreamed.

There's something warm across his face, his lips, and Richie doesn't have to swallow to know it's blood. Eddie's blood. Above, It dangled Eddie like a mouse caught by the tail. All Richie could do was scream: till his throat felt raw, till his jaw felt like breaking, till his lungs possibly gave out.

"R-Richie..."

Screaming. Pleading.

But who was listening? (Certainly not god.)

Eddie's dead eyed stare had no answers and Richie really didn't have any questions other than: why? Why me? Why us? Why again? Why can't we be happy? Why did I forget you? Why wasn't my love enough to protect you? Why, why, why, why, WHY?

"Honey, he's dead."

Bev said that when Eddie died in the cave, then again with the car accident, and the plane crash, and the freak brain aneurysm. She'd said it after the botched mugging and when Eddie had been pushed in front of the train by a frantic commuter on a Monday morning. She'd said it every time, in every scenario, in every conceivable world where he'd tried so hard to get back to Eddie.

This is what you get when you touch other boys, Richie .

No one could guarantee Pennywise was dead. The thought plagued him constantly. Sure, Richie had stabbed him in a fit of rage so blinding he still didn't completely remember leaving Neibolt as it collapsed around them -- but did they really kill It? Did they end the cycle? What promise was there that the shit It showed him wouldn't really come true?

(Or that the universe wouldn't shit out another cosmic horror like It?)

He couldn't chance it. That was the mantra Richie now lived by: Can't chance it happening, so avoid it happening at all costs. What was it, with the lowercase I? Anything that meant something bad happening to Eddie, Richie figured. And bad things only happened when Richie was around. They always did. No matter how hard Richie tried, it always came back to Eddie, who was punished for Richie's transgressions.

Well, if that was the case, so be it. He'd leave Eddie alone. He'd leave him alone because even the most unhappiest of lives with Eddie in it, alive but apart from Richie, was still better than living in a world where Eddie was dead.

Dead like the body which dangled before him.

The scene changed from a dark nothing, just voices and colors, to the concrete feeling of cradling Eddie's frigid body. How could a body get so cold so fast? (He was just burning bright, alight with life, only minutes ago.) It didn't matter. If he let the other senses consume him -- focused more on the smell of sewer than of blood, on the feeling of dirt rather than blood -- Richie could pretend, for just a moment, that everything was OK. Eddie would wake up. He had to.

He touched his forehead to Eddie's, mumbling apology after apology.

“ You did this to me.”

The corpse’s whisper sent a spit of blood into Richie’s ear but he found himself uncaring. It was right. If Richie were slower, this would have been the future set in stone. If Richie were faster, he would have never been caught in the Deadlights in the first place -- never had to know what it felt like to have seen his life, his lives, in every reality. Any reality.

It was enough to drive a man mad.

“I can’t fucking leave him like this, man,” Richie plead, but to whom, he couldn’t remember. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You want me to leave him down here, are you NUTS?”

His dreams always came back to this cave. Even after all the things It showed him, Richie kept coming back here for some reason. If he thought about it, maybe it was because this was the vision that felt the most real. This was the vision that had the greatest chance at becoming reality, one he’d averted some how, but only just.

Maybe he was just a masochist and this was Richie’s way of trying to pay penance for keeping this secret for so long. (Even after Eddie had told him he had a wife! Long after. Still on-going? That feeling had never stopped, Richie realized, even when forgetting for so long.)

Or, perhaps, there was no reason. Dreams were unexplainable things, like feelings. Unpredictable, untamable. You could smother them for as long as possible but they’d always come back. They could go away for months, even years, but they’d always resurface one day.

The scene changed from holding Eddie to Richie in a kitchen, talking on the phone. Was it his kitchen? It didn’t matter, the way reason never mattered in dreams. Bev’s voice came from the receiver, but it was garbled. Almost like she was underwater. Or was he? He couldn’t breath.

Christ, he couldn’t breath.

It was then he noticed that blood had filled the room, up to his ears. It filled his mouth and splashed in his eyes. It coated his hair, slicked his face, ran up his nose -- then his feet couldn’t touch the ground. When had this happened? All he could do was tread water.

“Richie?”

His head dipped below the blood, as bright red as those fucking balloons It carried around. Why couldn't he let go of the phone? And Bev could hear him struggling, couldn't she? Why wasn't she helping? Why didn't she sound more frantic? His head dipped again. Something grabbed at his ankle and pulled him, sending down faster.

Usually, we float. But you'll sink, Richie.

“Richie, baby, it's OK.”

He went down. Why fight it? What was the use? If Bev said it was OK, then it had to be. She wouldn't lie to him. Closing his eyes, Richie tried not to breath. Something wrapped around his free hand, latching to his wrist. He still couldn't let go of the phone.

“Rich?”

The further he sank, the brighter it got .

His lungs burned.

“Hey, yeah that's it. C'mon.”

The brighter it got, the more it hurt.

His lungs burned.

“Richie?”

The more it hurt, the more he wanted to go back to sleep .

Mother of god, did his lungs burn.

“Honey? Richie?”

A ragged gasp tore from his body like it was punched out.

The scene changed from a red, red descent to a white, white popcorn ceiling. Yet, Richie knew this wasn't some fabled version of heaven. For one, there was so much pain -- wasn't there supposed to be no suffering in death? For another, why would God, the almighty and

all-powerful, go with the same tacky interior decorator who designed his grandmother's basement?

Fuck, maybe this was heaven. That guy would have to be dead by now. What if this was his gig in the afterlife? *Shit* -- could he get thrown out for insulting God's decorating skills?

"Richie! *Ohmygod*-- Can you hear me?"

He turned his head and there was Bev, half-way to standing up from a cheap wooden chair. He smiled at her on reflex and felt his lower lip split.

"No need to yell, Red." (Christ, was that his voice? What had he done before this, gargle glass?) When Richie licked at his mouth to wet it, he tasted blood. "I'm right here."

She looked like she wanted to say something, but turned away before she could. Her eyes were red rimmed and, framed by the flame of her hair, her skin looked very pale. It was all he could see of her before she made a slow break for the door.

"Let me get the doctor," Bev said, voice thick with phlegm. Richie was struck with the feeling that something very bad had happened. "I'll... I'll be right back."

Wait. Doctor?

Richie looked down to find an IV drip, injected and taped, to his right arm.

"Aw, shit." Really, that was all he could say.

So it turned out, maybe he'd had a bit too much to drink. At least, that's what the doctors said. Well, not so much said as told him, adding he was lucky to be alive to boot. Then came the tough questions.

Mandatory suicide screening, the doctor said, launching into it with little preamble.

In the past few weeks, have you felt little interest in pleasure in doing things you'd usually take pleasure in?

Well maybe, Doc, but that's just because I've been so tired lately I haven't had the chance to kick back and enjoy the little things in life due to the never-ending flood of nightmares and my inability to keep solid food in my body as a result.

But instead, Richie shrugged and said: "Not really? Guess, I've just been tired. But I really haven't been thinking too much about it."

In the past few weeks, have you felt that you or your family would be better off if you were dead?

Better off? Well wouldn't everyone? That fucking clown showed me what a cosmic fuck up I am in every conceivable universe, so why wouldn't that hold the same in this one? If I hang around, I just make things miserable. I get people killed. So if you remove me from the equation...

But instead, Richie scrunched his nose and said: "Oh, god, no."

In the past few weeks, have you wished you were dead?

No comment .

But instead, Richie rolled his eyes and said: "Absolutely not. Why would I? I've got a great life."

When it was all said and done, the doctor didn't look convinced and neither did Bev, who Richie said could stay when the attending nurse tried to kick her out for his own privacy. Now, looking at her, he kind of wished he'd told her to leave -- if only for her own mental health.

Doc, who might have introduced herself at some point but Richie wasn't paying attention, gave him the rundown once she felt satisfied he'd answered all her questions: some stitches in his foot from stepping on broken glass, some cuts to both hands from falling into debris, major dehydration from the vomiting, a minor concussion from the fall.

He'd almost OD'd but by the time the OR received him, doctors were able to pump his stomach before the worst set in. Richie had avoided death -- but only just. (And wasn't that just the story of his life?) It would still be another hour or so before he could be discharged, Doc said, wanting the drugs and drink to completely leave Richie's system before he left.

Just in case.

When Richie commented that he strangely felt fantastic for having come so close to dying, Doc so graciously informed him -- in a tone that meant business -- the only reason he wasn't feeling a hangover on top of the hurt was because of the drip. Were he a different kind of man, her dark hair, darker eyes and that straightforwardness would have done something for him.

But he wasn't, and also wasn't the kind of man who harassed people just doing their jobs, so Richie simply nodded and thanked her as she turned her attention back to his charts.

"When's the last time you've slept?" He asked Bev once Doc left, whose parting words were something about scheduling a follow up appointment with a therapist or maybe checking out AA. *Fat chance of that* .

It wasn't that he wanted to be difficult, it was just that he didn't see a point.

He knew he had problems. He knew he wasn't dealing with them in the proper way. But he also knew that there was nothing he could tell a normal human being, who wouldn't immediately brand him as crazy. The only ones who wouldn't send him to the nuthouse were the Losers, and he wouldn't bother even if his own arm was falling off. They didn't need that. Things were just getting better for

everyone.

Maybe he'd just cut back on the drinking. Just take it easy for awhile.

(Maybe, but probably not.)

Bev yawned. "What day is it?"

"You're asking me?"

She laughed. It was stale and forced. The only noise in his room was the oppressive tick-tock of a large analogue clock by the door and Richie pretended to be enamored with a rip in his bedding (had they *reused* this? Wasn't that like... *illegal* or something?) instead of meeting Bev's eyes. Her own gaze flitted around the room, looking for anything else but him to focus on.

In is peripherals, he saw Bev open her mouth, then close it again. She pursed her lips. She furrowed her brows. She didn't say a word and he didn't know if that was for the better or the worse.

God, did he hate this song and dance. More than anything, Richie just wanted to go home. Not even to drink but just to sleep. For once, he wasn't dreading it but drooling for it. His skin felt stretched thin, like canvas over a bass drum head, and he knew that if he were to sleep now he wouldn't dream.

Before he could do that though, he owed some form of explanation to Beverly at least. Even if it were the last thing he wanted to do. Even if it wasn't the truth -- just something easier to swallow. Better to rip it off like a band-aid tacked to arm hair then deal with the agony of a slow peel.

"If you have something you want to ask, just--,"

He couldn't even get the full sentence out before Bev pounced. "Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"That you didn't want to kill yourself?"

“Aw, c’mon,” Richie groaned. “Why does everyone think I have it out for myself?”

She looked at him like he’d grown another head and gestured to the bed in which he lay.

“Look, I didn’t mean to and it was an accident,” he said. “Simple as that. You heard me tell the doctor.”

“Simple as that?”

“Simple as that.” He grinned. “Is there an echo in here?”

The look didn’t leave her face. If anything, the frown became more pronounced and her eyes squinted further.

“Look,” he shrugged, “I know it’s not the ideal scenario, but here we are. And in a couple of hours, we’ll all go home and forget this ever happened.”

“Oh, absolutely not. Are you crazy?”

“Do you know me? Course I’m crazy, little lady.”

Richie tried to smile again but Bev didn’t rise to his bait, which only left him with the choice to roll his eyes and throw his head back against the inclined bed. He winced. Beverly clearly picked up on it but said nothing. Instead, she readjusted in her plastic chair, folding her legs one way, then the other, then back to the way they were before.

When Bev had finally gotten as comfortable as she could, she leaned forward and put her face in her hands, staying still for so long Richie thought she’d fallen asleep. After a beat, she pulled her hands back and rubbed at her eyes.

Then came the staring. Bev stared like she could see right through him, see his thoughts, see what he’d been dreaming just moments ago. Bev stared in the way one did when a face was familiar but they couldn’t place the name, like she knew the answer but was glued to the tip of her tongue. She stared and stared and she wouldn’t stop.

The anticipation of her verbally reaming him out made Richie's skin itch. Was it over? No, he'd be stupid to think so. Had it even started? Probably not. Crap like this churned his stomach like he had to shit. What was anxiety if not the world's shittiest response to any and every type of uncomfortable situation? And what was the most natural response for Richie, in any type of situation like that, except to run his mouth?

"Christ, what I wouldn't give for a cigarette," Richie moaned as he sat up. "You know, I haven't smoked since I was like twenty-seven? I quit on a dare and just never went back."

Bev hummed like she was humoring him. "It's a nasty habit, anyways."

"Totally gross."

"And yet, now you have me thinking..." she turned her attention away from him to fish something out of her purse. Richie would have doubled over with laughter were he physically capable.

"Oh my god you *vape*?" He sounded like he'd just won the lottery. "You? Fucking Trendy Tammy -- you vape!?"

"Trendy Tammy?" Bev made a face. "Not your best work."

He continued on, undeterred. "Is it cotton candy? Oh god, *please* tell me it's something stupid like grape surprise or Mountain Dew Baja Blast."

Bev looked around as if any minute, one of the nurses would come busting through the door to escort her off the premises. Satisfied, she took a pull and blew out a long breath, clouded with vapor.

"Smoking in a hospital," Richie snickered. "How absolutely *scandalous*, Ms. Marsh. What's next, fucking in a church?"

"Shut up. I only do it when I'm stressed."

"Don't we all? And you also never answered if you have one of those stupid flavors like green tea or carmel swirl."

“For someone who thinks this shit is stupid, you sure do know a lot about vaping.” Bev took another drag. “It’s menthol flavor, by the way. Because I am an *adult* . An adult who has *been through some shit* in the last couple of hours if you haven’t noticed.”

“Hey, adults can dig cotton candy. I know I probably would.” Richie shook his head. “Christ, could you imagine if they made vapes when we were kids?”

“Sure would have saved my ass, what with the smell and everything? At least Ben isn’t on me as much now... Also helps he thinks I’ve quit completely.” She shook the small device like she was showing off a prize. “I’ve been told it’s not exactly *cool* anymore to do but, once a Loser always a Loser, I guess.”

“Yeah but who cares? With all those fucking flavors I would have gone from chimney to the entire damn factory with how much I would have smoked.” He laughed as much as his burning throat and aching stomach would allow. “Shit, I probably would have been featured on Guinness’ World Records: First kid to kick it from vape induced lung cancer by fifteen. Here lies Richard W. Tozier: Well, he tried. Then he died.”

All at once Bev’s face changed from a tired docility to a cold rage.

Oops . Not the right thing to say, clearly.

She opened her mouth like she wanted to say something but at the last second decided to take a pull from the device again. Blowing out the vapor in a steady stream, Richie felt very much like a knight staring down a dragon in the legends of old.

Or, not a knight. That was too fancy. Court jester, maybe?

Alas, poor Richard, I knew him well and all that. At least use my skull for some cool mantle piece decor, Marsh. Maybe hollow it out and use it as a wine glass.

“You have a lot of fucking nerve to joke about something like that right now,” Bev hissed. Her grip tightened around the vape and, for a moment, Richie wondered if she could break it through sheer rage.

Maybe she had that same thought too, because she shoved it back into her bag a second later. “ *Lot of fuckin’ nerve.*”

For the first time in maybe his whole life, Richie elected to say absolutely nothing in response. He turned his attention back to the frayed hospital blanket, back to the hole in the sheets, and stuck a finger in it. The rip didn’t get any bigger even when he tugged on it.

Maybe if you tried harder...

What could he even say to her, anyway?

Sorry didn’t mean it?

Whoopsie-daisy! My bad, Bevvie?

Won’t do it again?

Richie was fresh out of cash and the Wheel of Excuses wouldn’t let him buy a vowel. A God damn shame.

Furthermore, what could he say to her and mean it? Half the shit he told Doc, Richie wasn’t even a hundred percent on. Did he want to kill himself? Well no, that wasn’t the plan. From what he could remember of the other day -- which, shit, wasn’t time just the ever-flowing enigma? It felt like only minutes ago -- Richie didn’t set out with the explicit goal of dying. He just wanted a drink. Apparently, it was one too many.

Coupled with the pills he didn’t remember taking (no doubt fueled by the muscle memory of taking them nearly every night for the last couple weeks) it was natural shit would end up like it did. He didn’t mean for it to but it happened anyway.

Even if no one believed him, that was the truth. As far as Richie was concerned there was one thing left to do -- move on. He didn’t purposely try to die, but if it happened, it happened. Like he’d so graciously informed Mike when they sought to topple Pennywise the second time: People died every day.

Who was he in the grand scheme of things? If any, or even all, of those visions were true his death could even be a blessing in disguise.

Richie looked back up at Bev, whose face hadn't changed. He wondered if she'd even blinked.

This conversation was always coming but knowing that didn't make it any easier. If anything, it felt like being stared down by his own mother (God rest her soul) who knew he skipped school but still listened to Richie double down on lying about it anyways. Because even though the lying made it worse, it never stopped him from trying.

Dear lord, did he try.

Richie turned away from her again, unable to face the coldness in her stare. He had no other cards in his hand, but damn if he could afford to fold.

"Well?" Bev pressed again. "Are you gonna say anything?"

"I'm sorry?" Richie told the bed sheets. He meant to sound firm though it came out as anything but. "I didn't... I know you don't believe me, but I promise, I really didn't mean to --,"

"Kill yourself? Is that what you're trying to say? You didn't mean to try and *kill yourself*, Richie?" The more she spoke the louder her voice got. "You didn't mean for us to find you like that? Didn't mean to pass out in your own puke? Almost OD? Fucking *die*?"

If her goal was to make him feel like a dog, chastised for pissing on the rug, it was working. Richie had failed, twice, to meet her gaze. He couldn't -- couldn't, because maybe if he didn't, she'd just drop it. (*She wouldn't* .) If she dropped it, she wouldn't get involved. And if Bev wasn't involved, then maybe he wouldn't have to worry about--

A self-deprecating smile split his face. "Well, when you put it like *that* --,"

"No! No jokes!" Bev yelled, but her voice was hoarse, no doubt from crying, and it cracked as it rose in pitch. "You don't get to joke about something like this! This is -- you don't... you don't get to --," she breathed in a sob, "You've -- I *can't* . I can't just --," two trembling hands covered Bev's face again and she let loose a muffled, frustrated

scream.

“Hey, hey now,” Richie grabbed for the wrist closest to him and slowly pulled it away from her face. He shushed her, a gentle noise just barely louder than the frustrated sobs Bev was making. “Bevvie, baby, please. I hate it when you cry. Please don’t -- *please* , it’s not worth it. Everything’s OK.”

Oh, how he hated it when people cried, and hated it more when it was people he cared about. Richie had never quite established the proper bedside manner for calming someone down, or cheering them up, that didn’t somehow incorporate jokes.

“Everything’s *not* OK, Richie!” She said sharply, voice thick. While she hadn’t started crying, Beverly’s eyes were glassy and the tears threatened to drip at any moment. “It’s not! Look me in the eyes and tell me something like that was an accident. Look me right in the face and say you didn’t mean it.”

“I already did!”

“ Say it.”

“Bev....”

“Word for word. Say it.”

But if he couldn’t even completely lie to himself, how could he lie to her? Richie squeezed her wrist. What he wanted to convey through that, he wasn’t sure, but it released a fresh wave of quiet tears down Beverley’s face. She breathed in an ugly, snotty sound and moved to intertwine their fingers.

“Richie, I want to help you -- we want to help you -- but you have to let us know *how* . You have to let us know--”

“ *Bev* .” At some point, he’d turned into a scratched record, only capable of repeating the same few lines. Nevertheless he still spun, trying to sing his tune the best he could. “Bev, I’m sorry -- but I promise you, *promise* you, this was an accident. I didn’t mean to... I didn’t mean...,” but what he could have said, Richie didn’t know.

"You have to believe me." His whispered plea felt louder than a scream, swallowed up in the room's silence. " *Please* ."

Beverly's lips flattened into a thin line. For a moment they studied one another, mirror reflections in their sadness: two sets of tired eyes, two brains at wits end, two bodies stacked full of weary bones. It wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last, that Richie would wonder when they got so old.

If anyone could understand, it would be Bev , a part of him thought. She'd know what to do. She always has. Always does. Just tell her, you stupid coward.

But a larger, louder part of Richie shouted it down. He thought of Eddie dangling in the air. He thought of Beverly calling, days or months or years from now, to inform him that "honey... he's dead." He thought of a cold apartment, years in the future, and an empty answering machine -- a future where everyone lived, they just moved on, leaving behind him and (in some cases) a cat.

(At least the cat was a bright spot in all this.)

Eventually, Bev was the first to blink -- literally and figuratively.

"Richie... you're not well."

"God, please don't start this shit."

"Normal people don't --,"

He cut her off. "If you haven't noticed, normal people don't, and *haven't*, done a lot of the shit we've done."

"Beep beep," she said through gritted teeth.

"No, I'm being serious. I know you want to make this out to be something bigger than it is, but --"

"--is it too much for you to not joke, when all I'm trying to do is --,"

"Bev! Drop it," Richie had never yelled at her before, never really yelled at anyone on principle, but this might be the first time he'd

come close. "I love you, I do. But you're not my mom. You're not my *girlfriend* , or my *wife* or, as much as I fucking wish you were, my sister. If you don't want to accept what I'm telling you, then *fine* . But what I'm telling you is --,"

"A crock of shit? A fucking *lie* ?"

Richie bit into his lip to keep from truly yelling and felt it split down the middle again. The tang of iron was enough to keep him focused away from raising his voice. Away from giving away his game, and fucking everything up.

"You don't have to believe me," he said slowly, "but when the doctor comes back, I'm checking myself out. And then we're not going to talk about this again, OK?"

She stared at him a moment longer, the teary-eyed look replaced by a hardened gaze of green steel. Bev stood, almost knocking over her chair in the process.

"Ok, you know what? FINE! Fine. You don't want to tell me how you end up with enough booze in your blood to over *six times* over the legal limit, Rich? Then *fine* . " She broke their grip only to reach for his wrist, holding it tight enough to almost hurt.

He'd forgotten how ferocious she could be, namely because her ire had never truly been directed at Richie before. Never in a serious way. But now she was in his face, crunched over him in all her barely-over-five-foot glory, and for just a brief second her conviction frightened Richie.

"You don't need have some explanation for how you ended up with enough pills in your system to, to -- I don't fucking know, *tranquilize* an elephant, I guess. Because it was an accident, right? Because just *oops* , it fucking happened? You're right. I'm not your mother or, god forbid, your fucking wife but it doesn't take some degree from Harvard to know that shit just doesn't *happen* , Rich. That crap just doesn't magically end up in your body."

"It was an accident!"

Looming over him, large in her anger, Beverly seemed much taller than her five-foot-four stature.

“An accident is spilling a glass of water! It’s oversleeping your alarm! It’s not--,”

“If you don’t believe me, then you don’t have to be here! Go!” It was his turn to pull from her grasp. Richie ran a hand through his hair, wildly throwing the freed one in the direction of the door. “No one’s stopping you from leaving, Beverly! I didn’t ask for you to drop in on me unannounced and I certainly didn’t ask for you to send my ass to the hospital.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. He didn’t blame her, he couldn’t believe some of the shit that was coming out of his mouth either. *But if it worked...*

“Are you,” she cut herself off with a wild laugh. “Are you *kidding* me? *Unannounced!*? You gave me a fucking *KEY*, Richard!”

“Yeah, I know I did. But do you know what it’s going to look like if it gets out that my ass was in a hospital? If you would have just let me sober up--,”

“Sober *up* ? You were on the verge of overdosing!” Bev stalked to the end of the bed like she couldn’t say the words and look at him. “You almost fucking flatlined on the way over here! What part of that does your thick fucking skull not comprehend?”

“It still -- the fucking reporters... and the *pictures* !”

The excuses sounded weak, even to his own ears. He just had to remind himself that it was better this way. Because if Bev’s visions came true with Stan, then there was no guarantee that Richie’s visions would be any different -- with Eddie, with her, with Bill, with any of them.

Bev was back in front of him in an instant, a storm of nervous energy and fury.

“Oh, who gives a *shit* about paparazzi, Richie? You know what else fucks up careers? Being DEAD. *Dying* . Oh-ver-dosing,” She sounded

out every syllable, clapping along to them individually. “And you are absolutely fucking *out of your mind* if you think I’m just gonna roll over and believe you now. After the shit that’s coming out of your mouth?” Beverly scoffed. “How about, oh, I dunno ‘*thank you*’, Bev, for bringing me to the hospital,’ or -- hell, I’d even settle for a firm handshake and an ‘I’m sorry’ for all the *shit* Ben and I had to -- all the shit we saw... *Christ*, Richie!”

She threw herself back into the chair, but scooped back far enough that Richie couldn’t touch her from the bed. The tears were back, not sad but angry.

“I don’t get it. You aren’t making sense,” she whispered, hands tightening into fists. “I don’t get what’s going on in your head, Rich, because you’re not making any fucking *sense*.”

“Wish I knew myself.” He meant it as a joke but it fell flatter than flat. There was too much truth in all the hot air he was blowing to get that balloon off the ground.

A dinging noise cut through the swamp thick tension in the air. Richie looked around, confused. Beverly, too, looked taken aback before something clicked and she retrieved an iPhone from her purse. It chimed twice more before she flicked the sound to silent.

Richie laid back in the bed again, this time to stretch his neck out to its full length. He could hear her fingers patting against the touchscreen, but thought better than to pry. The point of this whole exercise was, after all, to get her to leave. Maybe she was doing just that.

The door to the room opened and Bev sat up in her seat, ramrod straight. It was Doc, with Ben in tow, both looking cautious. Tepidly, Bev smoothed her hair down. If they heard the yelling, if anyone did really, Richie didn’t care. He just wanted his own bed and a shower, though maybe not in that order.

“Mister Tozier --,”

“Please,” Richie cracked a grin that didn’t reach his eyes, “Call me Richie. Mister Tozier was my father.”

Beverly sighed and grabbed her purse off the floor. Richie watched as she stood, moving behind Doc to stand with Ben. He looked equally as disappointed as Bev did just a few minutes ago, which made Richie's stomach flip and tuck and roll. Ben took her into his broad arms, squeezing her into a hug that ended with a kiss pressed to Bev's forehead. They looked beautiful together.

Well, fuck 'em .

"Mister Tozier?"

He looked back to Doc, who wore a look of both concern and annoyance.

"I asked if you were ready to fill out your discharge papers, Mister Tozier." She produced a clipboard with a few sheets of official looking documents on them. A slim pen on a silver chain, attached to the clip at the top, clinked against the wood as Doc gave it to him. "Once this is done, you're free to go."

"Perfect," Richie said, feeling anything but.

For a moment, he wondered if the concussion made him forget English as all the words on the paper blended together. He tested the pen in the whitespace of the document heading, right next to the hospital logo, scribbling out a bastardized version of a star.

It would be so easy to tell Bev he was sorry, right now. All it would take was Richie setting aside his pride and saying two little words. Just two. Probably more, but those first two -- 'I'm sorry' -- would be the most important. She and Ben were just doing what they tried to do best: being his friend.

And what did Richie do to thank them? Shit all over their efforts.

He tore his attention from the discharge forms, not sure what to say but sure he'd say something nevertheless, but found the doorway to his room was now empty. They'd left. Richie had gotten what he wanted.

Why then did it feel like he'd lost?

“Mister Tozier,” Doc cleared her throat, “if you’re not feeling capable of completing the forms we will have to keep you in observation for another night.”

He shook his head and turned back to the forms.

“I’m feelin’ right as rain, doctor. Just a little tired, that’s all. Just a little tired.”

As he finished filling out the forms, Richie realized he never asked why Bev decided to drop in on him that night. He turned the clipboard back over to Doc. Well, it probably didn’t matter anyways.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm not entirely satisfied with this chapter so I wrote and rewrote and rewrote it, and I think this is the version I settled on has hating the least? I realize that's not a very good thing to say as the author, but accidental-suicide attempts are tricky things to write and even trickier things to try and explain, especially when the person can't even admit it to themselves that that's exactly what happened.

Thank you for reading and please, as always, I beta my own work so if there are any mistakes please let me know!

13. Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

It's the moment you've all been waiting for: A not entirely angsty chapter. Wonder what THAT could mean?

Finishing the forms doesn't take much time at all, but what does throw a wrench into things is clothes -- or more specifically, Richie's lack thereof.

What's left of the sweater he wore the previous day is in two pieces, soaked in vomit, lying in a hospital hazmat disposal bin in the basement. He only knew this because Doc had once again, so graciously, informed him of two things: One, that the only clothes he currently possessed were the boxers strapped to his ass and; two, there'd be some things sent up from donations he could try on, but there's no guarantee they'd fit.

Well, the gaudier, the better in Richie's opinion. It couldn't be any worse than what was stocked at home.

*Maybe this could be a bit . "So there I was, naked from the dick down and just **covered** in my own puke..."*

An attending nurse came back with Richie's temporary wardrobe. There was a long sleeve army-green shirt, that proudly proclaimed "THIS GUY WENT TO HAWAII," with two hands, thumbs pointing back to the neckline of the shirt, tacked on underneath the wording in clip art. Given the circumstances of how he found himself in this mess, it took everything Richie had not to laugh in delight. The pants, sea-foam colored scrubs that looked like they'd hit just above his ankle, were admittedly less exciting.

"We didn't have anything tall enough on hand," the guy said, handing Richie his clothes, "and all we had for shoes were the disposable foam kind, so... here's to hoping they fit, right?"

He left before Richie could get out of bed to assess them, saying

something about giving Richie his privacy. The shirt worked. The scrubs he had to cinch tight, but they stayed up over his hips so he couldn't complain though he was right about the fit in the leg. The shoes, however, were entirely too small and it forced Richie to wear them almost like slides with his heels hanging out the back.

A quick look in the mirror of the en suite bathroom let him know he really did look every bit the mess he felt. Well, at least the only other person to be privy to this -- God willing -- would be his Uber driver.

Richie hobbled over to the door and let the nurse know everything worked, more or less. The guy came back in with a wheelchair and gave him a once over. He pulled the chair over to Richie's bedside while rattling off instructions to come back in a few days and get the stitches in his foot removed, plus how to properly take care of them.

"Hop in," he said, patting the handles of the wheelchair.

The nurse moved away from the chair to grab crutches out of the utility closet in the room. When Richie hadn't moved from the bed by the time he got back, the man sighed.

"Listen, man, I know people hate the spectacle of being wheeled out, but it's hospital policy," he pushed the chair even closer to Richie. "And, your ride is waiting in the west lobby, so let's not make him wait any longer, 'kay, man? One of the desk staff said he looks like he's three seconds from being the next person to be admitted and I don't wanna be responsible for that happening."

Richie gingerly set himself into the wheelchair without further complaint. Then the nurse's words clicked.

"Ride home?" He wondered aloud. "I didn't call anyone."

The nurse shrugged, wheeling Richie out of the room. "Not sure. Maybe one of your visitors did? I just wanted to let you know so that you weren't worried about getting a ride."

"Did they say--"

In the blink of an eye they were standing before the elevators, which opened like it was expecting them. A rush of vertigo hit Richie hard

and fast. He clutched at one of the chair's handrails, breathing slow out through his nose.

Jesus. Fuck concussions .

"Buddy, I told you, I don't know anything. Just that you got a ride," he pushed Richie inside, "and that he's been haranguing the desk staff over where you were and how you were doing." He snorted. "I didn't even know a little dude like that could have so much energy."

A sinking feeling settled in his veins. He never did find out how Bev and Ben knew to find him. Could it be Bill? Or Mike? Shit, even --

No. No it couldn't be Eddie. He hated hospitals. He couldn't, didn't, do hospitals. Why, then, did this feeling in his gut continue to coil tighter and tighter until Richie felt like sweating?

Please don't be him. Anyone but him.

He watched as the floor numbers lit up in descending order -- seven, six, five, four, three -- until it landed on L. The elevator settled. When the doors didn't immediately open, Richie fleetingly hoped that meant they were stuck. A moment later they slid apart. He was aware of the nurse talking at him, to him, but it was all just white noise.

*It can't be. It **can't** be.*

His palms were slick with sweat, but rubbing them on his scrubs did nothing to stop it. What would be the odds that, after everything Richie tried and after all the distance he'd attempted to put between them, Eddie would have come to him anyways? That, even when Richie tried to run (maybe not literally since sports *really* wasn't his thing), Eddie would find him? It would explain how Bev and Ben knew he was in trouble.

Except it really didn't.

Not even in the slightest.

Maybe, Richie thought to himself, that it really didn't matter how much distance he put between himself and Eddie because it was always fated to end badly. He rubbed his palms again on his thighs.

The repetitive motion must have caught the nurse's attention, because he asked if Richie was alright enough to leave.

"Yeah, just... nervous." He didn't see a point in lying. "Since. Well, you know."

The nurse hummed sympathetically but if he did anything else after that, Richie hadn't the faintest clue. His world melted down to two things: the rush of blood in Richie's ears, and an outline of a man who haunted his nightmares and starred in his teenage fantasies. (Oh, who was he kidding? He starred in the adult ones too.)

As Richie was wheeled closer to the lobby, people in their way parted like the nurse's name was Moses. And as the bodies parted, Richie's vision tunneled on one distinct, dark swath of hair; on a man he'd recognize anywhere.

Eddie .

All he could see, all he could conceive, was Eddie. One word, two syllables. The perfect beat for his heart to thump along to: Edd -ie , Edd- ie , Edd- ie . Richie couldn't tell if he was nervous or excited, then wondered what was the difference as his heart thumped with a strange amalgamation of the two.

You shouldn't be excited , his brain whispered, *this is EXACTLY what we've been trying to avoid*. But all his heart could dumbly do was keep beat with the name Edd -ie , Edd- ie , Edd- ie . Richie whiplashed between being fourteen and forty, hands sweaty at the prospect of being alone with the boy of his dreams. (Hands sweatier at the thought of these months of self-imposed exile being all for nothing.)

Christ, Richie thought, maybe he really should put stock into seeing a shrink. Maybe then someone could tell him if these violent, completely-across-the-spectrum slides of emotion were normal or not. Probably not. But then again, like he'd told Bev, when had any of them ever been normal?

The nurse slowed the wheelchair and caught Eddie's attention. "Sir, Mister Tozier's here if you'd like to..."

Eddie whirled around, his brown doe eyes somehow conveying both nervousness and relief at the same time. It was a look so uniquely Eddie, it made Richie want to laugh and smooth the wrinkles out from between Eddie's eyebrows with the pads of his fingers.

"Rich--," Eddie breathed out. "You're...,"

"Hey." He smiled weakly. "I'd ask what the fuck you're doing here but--,"

As it was with Bev, Richie found it difficult to meet Eddie's gaze, but the nurse saved him from making a further fool of himself.

"His paperwork is all completed if you're ready to take him home," he said. "Just bring him back anywhere from ten to fourteen days from now to get the stitches out and he'll be good to go."

"*Stitches*?" Eddie looked to Richie, who shrugged and mouthed a sheepish "oops?"

Eddie thanked the nurse and took the reins from him, pushing Richie out the door. Before they parted, the man pulled a manila envelope out of the back pocket of the chair and pushed it at Eddie. He explained it was resources, if Richie did end up interested in pursuing either personal or group therapy.

He wiped his palms on the thighs of his scrubs again.

"Eds, Eddie, I gotta know. How did you--," Richie couldn't even complete the thought before Eddie shushed him with a soft but sharp: "Don't. Not now."

He didn't look at Richie as he began wheeling them toward the exit.

"I --," Eddie cleared his throat, "Later. We'll talk later."

Well, that was fair. If Eddie was going to lose his shit like Bev had, and rightfully so, it was probably better not to do it in a hospital parking lot for both of their sake. He pushed Richie out the door and into the blindly bright December sun. Even though it was California, Richie shivered.

“I cleaned your apartment.”

It was the first conversation starter Eddie lobbed at him since hopping in the Uber twenty-some minutes ago. Richie suspected this was only because they were stuck in traffic and the longer they sat, the more the air nearly-physically soured. At least the driver had enough sense to not even try and make small talk, instead electing to turn up whatever nu-wave garbage she had on shuffle.

“Oh,” said Richie, because what else could be appropriate? “Sorry? Um, I think. Or thank you? I’m not --,”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Eddie snorted, then adding quieter, “I wasn’t going to let you come back to that.”

“Oh.”

Halfway home and all Richie had was the brainpower to string together a bunch of chopped-up sentences and grunts. What a delight. *You’ll give Big Bill a run for his money at this rate* . He turned his attention out the window, peeking into the other cars to see if there was any good people watching to be had.

It grew old rather quickly.

Instead, in the reflection over his own shoulder, Richie watched Eddie watching him. He couldn’t tell if there were more lines on the man’s face or less since they last saw each other. That probably was a good thing then, Richie supposed. No noticeable change likely meant no change at all. No change at all meant safety.

Security.

It means keeping him away from you. Far away.

It would be silly to think much would change in three months, outside of maybe length of hair on their heads or faces. (Though the stubble peppered along Eddie's jaw was a topic he'd rather not dwell too hard on, lest he became too hard from dwelling.) The scar on his cheek was turned away from Richie, but from the brief moment he saw it in the hospital, it appeared to be healing.

All and all, Eddie seemed good. Looked good.

Looked *alive* .

The car in front of them slammed on their breaks, causing their own Trail Blazer to stomp to a stop in return. Richie threw out his legs to keep from colliding with the passenger seat in front of him, pushing his injured foot into the floor and throwing both hands to the back of the passenger seat. A yelp of pain left his mouth before he could stop himself.

"Hey, can you watch it?" Eddie snapped, almost making Richie jump a second time. "He just got out of the fucking hospital!"

Richie turned to look at him. Whatever was written across his face, he hoped it was exasperated enough.

"Easy, man. There's no need to yell at her." He leaned forward and apologized to the driver, who mumbled back a sheepish *sorries* and *thank yous*.

Whatever she was getting paid for this ride, it wasn't enough, in Richie's opinion. In his periphery, he watched Eddie cross his arms and pretend not to slump down in the seat. *Was he pouting?* His gaze fixed on nothing in particular.

It was a move he recalled Eddie doing hundreds of times when they were kids. It usually came out when he was overruled by the group on one thing or another. When he was younger, though -- if Richie remembered right -- Eddie's bottom lip would push out, too, so far that you could hang a finger on it.

So when forty-year-old Eddie started making the same facial motions

that his moody, tween-age self would have done (whether he was aware of it or not) Richie almost screamed in delight. He might not be able to talk about what *this* was -- the hospital, the dream-visions, the isolation -- but he sure as hell could rib Eddie. There was always enough emotional bandwidth in him to do that.

“Are you *pouting* ?” He said, this time out loud, before he could stop himself. Eddie sat up straight, face going from cotton candy to salmon to lobster and Richie’s face split into a wicked grin in turn. “Too cute.”

“Shut up.”

Eddie turned away again, drawing his arms tighter to his midsection. If it was possible, he somehow got redder, though maybe it was just the lighting. In the reflection of the window nearest to Eddie, Richie could see the off-coloring of the knife wound Bower’s left. The sun exposure made it look red-raw. *Blood red* . Maybe he hadn’t seen it as well as he thought in the hospital? Richie’s grin fell, stomach giving a violent lurch.

“ *Hey* . Hey, no-- hey, look at me.”

Begrudgingly, Eddie faced him, eyes almost black in coloring. Whatever doctor he’d found to fix up the patch-job they did in Derry must have moonlighted as a seamstress because it didn’t look bad by half. While it still looked like it hurt, it didn’t look so much like the roast beef pile Richie envisioned; rather, it almost looked like Eddie had been burned. Not... great, but *considering* --

“What?” Eddie narrowed his eyes. “Why are you star--,”

“Your face! Uh-- your face looks... good?”

Wow, smooth .

“Is that a statement or a question?” Eddie brought a hand to his cheek, smothering the scar. He frowned. “It’s... still healing. Just so you know.”

“No, I mean it, you look -- it looks good! Really good! Healing,” Richie cleared his throat, “healing well. I’m just glad we didn’t Heath

Ledger you back in Derry Urgent Care.”

Oh, what the fuck.

Eddie's frown deepened, carving wavy grooves into his forehead as he rubbed at the mark. Richie felt like he'd kicked a puppy. When was this ride going to be over? Not soon enough. Even the awkward tension from earlier would have been preferable. Richie caught the driver's eye in the rear view and it looked like she was trying very hard not to ask questions.

Smart lady.

“I mean! Not that you couldn't pull off a Heath Ledger if you tried,” *oh my god shut up!* “Who knows? Crazy and sexy could be a look for you, man,” *shut up, shut UP, SHUT UP!!!* “I mean, not that you're crazy or anything, but a definite spitfire. Probably would be a REAL conversation starter with the ladies. I was always told chicks dig scars, especially ones with stories.”

“I'm pretty sure facial scars are right up there with forehead tattoos.”

“I think it makes you look handsomely rugged! Very cool. Regular ole Bear Grylls.”

“You think?” Eddie said, a strange look on his face, which morphed into a grimace before Richie could figure out what it was. “Also, isn't that the dude who drank his own piss? Like on live TV? *Multiple* times?”

Richie nodded but shrugged. “Who are we to judge a man in the wilderness? At his most base form?”

“You watch one thing on Nat Geo and suddenly you're fuckin' Henry David Thoreau.”

“Pretty sure that was on Discovery, dude.”

“You're impossible.”

“Impossibly *right*,” Richie smirked. “Go ahead look it up. *Ya feelin lucky, punk?*”

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Easily the worst Eastwood impression I’ve ever heard.”

“Easily? You hear a lot of Clint Eastwood impressions then? What, you fuckin’ hang around with a gang of Eastwood impersonators? You in a club? With a meeting schedule?”

“Well, *no* -- shut up,” he squirmed in his seat but tried to make it look like he was simply readjusting to face Richie better. *Cute, cute, cute*. “But ‘Fistful of Dollars’ is a classic. And yeah, the guy’s a *complete* douche now, but ‘Dirty Harry’ wasn’t that bad either.”

“Spaghetti westerns for a spaghetti man,” Richie sighed dramatically. “How *poetic*.”

“Also Clint Eastwood club? The fuck are --,”

“Yeah, you one of those Eastwood fanatics? You know how like, One Direction people are called Directionites or whatever? I wonder if his fanbase has a name?”

“They do,” Eddie snorted, “they’re called Republicans.”

Richie whooped out a laugh before he could contain himself. And while his stomach muscles ached in protest, it felt good. *Really* good. He couldn’t even recall the last time he’d genuinely laughed. Even Eddie, who had spent the entire car ride trying to maintain an air of seriousness over the whole situation, started giggling.

“Hot!” Richie cried, ignoring the fluttering in his stomach as Eddie tried to quiet his laughter by biting at his lips. “Hot takes! Eddie Kaspbrak gets off a good one, holy shit.”

“Stop.” Eddie shoved at him with just the tips of his fingers. He nodded toward Richie’s door. “And get the fuck out of the car, asshole. We’re here.”

They were? He looked out his window to find the car had, indeed, stopped right outside his complex. Whatever nervous courage blanketed him just now left him as suddenly as it came. The minute Richie stepped out of this car, he knew, there would be questions coming. There would be answers needed. And like it was with Bev,

he didn't know if he could -- or even wanted to -- provide them.

The door opened. There stood Eddie, crutches in hand, brows once again knitted together.

"You OK enough to get upstairs?"

Richie nodded. "Yeah, sorry," he shook his head, "I just got really tired all the sudden."

"I'll bet." His voice was soft, like talking to a wounded animal. Richie couldn't tell if he was touched or annoyed and it only made him angrier that he couldn't tell the difference.

He took the crutches without touching Eddie.

Inside was a much different scene than he'd left it. For one, not even considering the fact that all the debris from his previous night's slip up was gone, his sink and counter tops sparkled.

"When you said you cleaned, you really fuckin' cleaned, huh Eds?"

Eddie made a noise which Richie roughly translated to: "That's not my name and also yes I deep cleaned your apartment, Richard, you're welcome."

"I hope you don't mind," Eddie said, thumbing toward the spare, "but I took over the guest bedroom for the time being."

Time being? Just how long did Eddie plan to stay?

"You're welcome to it. Sheets are clean, since I can't remember the last time anyone slept in them anyways."

“That doesn’t automatically make them clean.”

“Why not! If no one’s slept in them --,”

“There’s still dust in the air, jackass.”

“There’s dust fucking everywhere, dude, we live on a fucking ball of dirt.”

“That’s exactly my point!”

“Are you implying my *lovely* abode is dirty, Mr. Kaspbrak?”

Since Eddie had helped him upstairs, Richie and Eddie both had changed into more relaxed outfits. There was an unspoken agreement that leaving the apartment at any point today was right out. For a brief moment, Richie could pretend this was all sickeningly domestic. In another life, he could have had this.

Yes, there were several missed calls and texts from his director, Alec, wondering where the fuck Richie’d been for the past 40-or-so hours, but he could unsuccessfully ignore them for a while yet. He could continue on with this idea that, were it not for the dreams that showed him otherwise, this could be his life. This could be his future.

The thick, knit socks Richie wore almost made him forget about the damage to his foot, yet the blindingly white gauze wrapped around both his palms helped him remember. He’d fucked up and almost accidentally killed himself. That’s why Eddie was here, sitting on Richie’s couch and nursing a glass of water while they channel-surfed. He’d come out of love, yes, but not the kind that Richie craved.

That was fine. That was how it was *supposed* to be. It wasn’t going to end up like a Nicholas Sparks novel. Eddie would stay, probably until after the Christmas party, help Richie for the next few days, then go back to his wife.

Eddie’s wife. Shit.

He hadn’t even thought of her. Had she come? Was she *here* ? The thought of Eddie and his wife sleeping in his guest bed sent a weird,

indescribable feeling through his heart and stomach, like he'd just tried burping up food eaten too fast only to swallow it again.

Christ, what if they *fucked* in his spare while they were here? He'd have to sell his apartment, probably.

Richie held up a hand, effectively cutting Eddie's tirade on how dust was just dead skin particles short.

"So, uh," *act cool, act cool, act COOL* , "where's the missus? She stay home in New York?"

Another flurry of emotions rolled across Eddie's face before he settled on looking confused and just slightly annoyed.

"Are you joking?"

Richie began backpedaling. "I mean, it's totally cool if she tagged along! Love to meet her. Moira was her name, yeah?"

Eddie shook his head.

"Did you not know?"

"Know what?"

"I texted the group like, forever ago."

Oh, Christ. Oh, God. Is this the part where he says they're pregnant?

"*Myra* and I separated." He scratched at the back of his head like he didn't know what to do with his body. "Yeah, uh, like a little after we all came back from Derry. I filed for divorce."

"Oh."

It was weird to feel ecstatic and sympathetic at the same moment.

They sat in silence for a beat, watching a tampon commercial. In just a second, it would flick back to whatever movie channel Eddie found interesting. Until then, only the disclaimers of how Super Absorbent Kotex Ultra Max could possibly kill you filled the room.

Richie had only talked Eddie into letting them watch television if he promised to turn down the brightness and volume so that it couldn't further fuck with his head. Without it, he wasn't entirely sure what they would have said. Or done.

It'd probably just be a few solid days of this uncomfortable but not entirely unpleasant silence.

"I'm --,"

"Please don't say sorry," Eddie said. His tone left no room for arguing. "I hate how that's the go to for people when a guy gets a divorce. Like, I'm the one who filed it, you know? Why would I need people to feel sorry for me getting out of a relationship I didn't want to be in anymore?" He scoffed. "Doesn't make any sense."

"Well, if it's any consolation, I was going to say I was going to say I was proud of you. *Dickhead*. It's... regardless of why, it's never an easy decision to make so like -- good on you for being able to pull that plug, dude."

"Oh, uh. Well. Thanks then. I guess."

Silence again. This time the commercial was for dog food and the next one was for adult diapers. What was the fucking clientele this station was banking on for ad revenue? Eddie must have been on the same mental wavelength. He reached for the remote, changing the channel to some cooking show.

And maybe his stomach was sentient, because the minute he saw those poboys on television, Richie's gut gave a great groan.

"Oh god, sorry," he said, putting a hand over his belly like it would stifle the noise.

"No it's cool. I didn't eat -- oh, wow shit I haven't actually eaten anything since New York." Eddie looked stupefied by his own words. "Weird."

"What do you like?" Richie reached for his phone, thumbing it open before his eyes and brain could process the latest message from his director. "I'm assuming Chinese is a no go."

“Christ, I haven’t been able to even *look* at lo mein since--,”

Richie shuddered. “Glad I’m not the only one. So! No Chinese, that only leaves us with like... the entire rest of the world’s cuisines to choose from. Really narrows the field.”

“Oh shut up.”

“Pizza? That’s relatively easy. Or are you gonna be snobby about it because it’s not New York pizza? Or whisper sweet nothings into my ear about how the grease is going to clog my veins and the carby goodness will fatten me up? What’s it gonna be, Eddie-boy?”

The indignant noise Eddie made almost sent Richie into a fit of laughter. This was good. This was Derry, but without the looming threat of a killer clown looking to eviscerate them. This was --

the silhouette of Eddie dangling above him in the cistern

drowning in a sea of red balloons, feeling dirty, dirty, dirty,

“I’m sorry, who is this?” Bill’s voice. “I don’t know a Richard Tozier.”

hot blood tacked to corpse-cold lips

“I made him *small* ”

a memorial leaflet, reading, “His death is the punchline to the only funny joke he ever made: His life.”

(No, wait, that one actually happened.)

Right?

Right?

RIGHT?

Eddie's hand on his shoulder made him jump. Richie came back to himself, slowly, then all at once. He was in his living room. He'd just zoned out. Nothing had actually happened and he was going to order pizza.

Richie's mouth went dry. Any type of hunger he'd felt evaporated.

"Rich?"

Pizza. *Fuck* .

Eddie looked at him again with that same wounded animal weariness, waiting for him to respond.

"Shit, sorry." Richie said, but it came out as more of a croak. "Sorry, I just, uh --," he shook his head and put a hand over his eyes. The dizzying feeling of being drunk struck him despite being sober as a stone.

"Hey, don't apologize. I shouldn't have let you talk me into watching TV. With your concussion? Stupid. Just -- here," Eddie stood up. "Tell me the name of the pizza place you like and I'll order it, OK?" He pulled the phone out of his kangaroo pocket. "What do you want on your half?"

"Casa Bianca, please. Anything but mushrooms or anchovies." Already, he could taste the hot, greasy cheese in his throat. Richie's stomach churned like it did before puking, and he wasn't sure if it was because of hunger or nerves or the concussion he was pretending he didn't have. Richie opened his eyes, slow, letting his vision

gradually light up.

The room had stopped moving but Eddie was no longer in it. His voice filtered in from the spare room, telling whomever was on the other line: "Yes, I'll hold." On the television, Ina Garten regarded her nonexistent studio audience with a simpering smile.

Richie turned to his own phone, which had fallen between the couch cushions when he'd lost himself for a minute. He fished it out and opened it. Several messages from Alec let him know that *yes* he was in deep shit, but possibly not as deep as he could have been.

There was shooting today, but he'd hit the scenes that didn't involve Richie. Now there was a weeklong shooting break for the holidays. The last message he sent left no room for arguments: *"I know you're going through a lot right now but I need you on your A-Game once you get back from break. You no call/no show again and I'm going to have to replace you, understand?"*

Possibly being replaced from a show he'd co-written -- now wasn't that just the biggest kick in the dick? Not that he totally blamed Alec. This was Hollywood. Everyone had their own shit going on. If Richie couldn't get with the program then he had to get out of the way. Fuck, he almost did, in a sense.

He reread Alec's messages once more, then shot an "OK boss," text back to let him know he was alive.

The voicemails, he didn't even bother listening to. Their rough translations under the audio files let Richie know they were expletive laden but concerned in nature. Couldn't ask for more, really. When the sixth and final voicemail from Alec was deleted Richie let out a snort of a laugh. At least it sounded like no one knew he was in the hospital.

Thank god for small miracles.

"What's so funny?" Eddie had all but materialized in front of him, holding a refilled glass of water in each hand. *When had he snatched those?* He handed one to Richie, who accepted it without complaint.

“Jesus, Eds. I’m gonna have to put a fucking bell on you.”

“I’m plenty loud, you just need to pay attention better.”

“I can hardly pay my rent, how am I supposed to pay attention, too?”

Eddie made a face like he was trying not to laugh. “You’re not funny.”

“That’s what my manager tells me. Says I have a face for radio.” He batted his eyelashes, jokingly wiggling his index fingers into the dimples of his cheeks.

“Is that who was on the phone?”

Richie shook his head. “I wasn’t on the phone.”

“No, but you were laughing at something.”

“Oh, just... my boss. Director.” He waved a hand. “Same difference. He just -- well you could probably guess. Didn’t exactly know I was uh, in the hospital for the last night or so. Thought I was just playing hookie and called to bitch.”

“What?” Eddie looked alarmed. “How? Isn’t that like, his *job* to keep tabs on you?”

“No, that would have been -- well. Uh, remember I told you about my manager? Todd? And how he, uh, died?”

Eddie paled. “Oh. Oh fuck, man, I’m so --,”

“Don’t sweat it. We had this conversation already, remember?” Richie sank further into the couch. His eyelids felt heavy all of a sudden, the last few days worth of go-go-go catching up to him. “Besides, it means that nothing got leaked to the press so that’s... good. If it’s not on TMZ in like the next 12 hours, then no one will care. And anyways, it’s not like it’s your job to keep tabs on me either, you know?”

“Yes it is?” Eddie said, brows furrowed like Richie had made a stupid comment. “I’m your friend. That’s -- Richie, that’s *literally* what

friends do. We take care of one another.”

“Gross,” said Richie, because he didn’t know what else to say.

“Whatever. I got mushroom all over the pizza by the way. Anchovies and pineapple, too.”

“Still wouldn’t be the worst thing I’ve ever eaten, you know, since your mom let me--”

“Fucker!” Eddie cried, smothering him with a throw pillow before Richie could even get the rest of the sentence out.

It was over pizza when Richie finally broke, mouth full of some cheese-onion-green pepper mush, when he asked: “So, why haven’t you like, berated me yet or whatever?”

They sat at the breakfast bar, which Richie seldom used, half turned so they could still eat and see the television. Eddie had turned it off, saying it wasn’t good for Richie’s concussion, only to turn it back on when the quiet of the apartment became too stifling. He was also adamant about no food on the couch, despite it not being his couch. (“Do you want ants? Because that’s how you get ants, Richie.” “Isn’t that a line from Archer?” “Oh, fuck *off* . And fuck you.”) Richie acquiesced because of course he did. It was Eddie after all.

He had also, both sheepish and firm, explained to Richie that he’d dumped all the alcohol in the house prior to them returning to the apartment. Richie couldn’t even bring himself to be mad. Sure he was a little peeved when Eddie tacked on that he’d flushed the Ambien too, but pills were pills were pills. It wasn’t like he couldn’t get more whenever Eddie left.

Not that he necessarily wanted to. Just that he could, for if the dreams persisted.

So here Richie sat, lemonade in hand, watching as Eddie cut his pizza into bite-sized pieces and popped two into his mouth. He chewed four times on one side, then six on the other, before swallowing. Then he took a swig of water and asked right back: "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Despite it feeling like he knew Eddie, just as well as he did when there were kids, there were some moments when Richie felt like he was caught flatfooted.

"Like... the hospital, and stuff? I dunno," he ripped off a piece of garlic-butter crust, "I mean. Bev, she like, wanted to know -- like why... and how, and..." Richie trailed off. He ate the bit of bread and sucked a splash of butter and sauce off his fingers. The feeling of being a dog having its nose rubbed in the piss-mess it made came back to him, despite Eddie not doing anything but listening. "I dunno. I just figured you'd be on me about it, too. Because I gotta say, man, I don't do good with like... waiting for things? So if you're gonna yell at me I'd just like for you to get it over with."

Eddie grimaced, handing him a square of paper towel.

"I mean, I want to know if that's what you're asking. Of course I want to know. I thought you-- I thought something bad happened to you man. Really bad." His socked feet rubbed over the footrest on one of the bar stools and Richie found himself transfixed by the repetitive back and forth motion. "I also know that you're not gonna tell me until you're ready. And... well, I don't know when you'll be ready, but I do know something."

"Hm?"

"I'll be here when you are." Eddie popped a few more chunks of pizza into his mouth. "I'm willing to wait as long as it takes, Richie." His feet stopped. "'Sides, it's not like I have anywhere else to be."

"You gotta go back to work sometime," Richie challenged.

“Saved up a lotta sick days, man. This is actually my first vacation in like five years or so, now that I think about it.”

“Shitty fuckin’ vacation. Should ask for a refund.”

Eddie reached for another slice, blotting at the cheese with a clean napkin to remove its grease. It was the prissiest thing Richie had ever seen Eddie do, and somehow that didn’t stop it from being endearing. He started cutting at it again.

“Well the service sucks but the company isn’t half bad.” Eddie grinned to himself. “You know, when he’s trying not to be a dickhead.”

“Oh this isn’t trying, honey. This is *au natural* .”

“I’m well aware. I did know you as a child, after all. The only difference between then and now is that you’re taller.”

“And,” Richie stuffed the rest of his crust in his mouth, “I get *paid* to annoy people now. Who’d’a thought?”

“Certainly not me.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence as Jeopardy played on in the background. Every few minutes, Eddie would mumble an answer and Richie would laugh when he got it wrong. Somehow, though, he destroyed the Disney and geography category. When the pizza was half gone, Richie took their plates and rinsed them while Eddie pulled the slices out of the box, wrapped them in tin foil, and broke down the cardboard into smaller pieces for recycling.

The feeling of domesticity washed over Richie again, hitting him so hard he feared it might knock him over. He breathed deep through his nose to settle himself.

Eventually they were back on the couch where they dozed, sun long gone from the horizon. Richie watched as exhaustion finally began to catch up with Eddie. His head would dip every couple of minutes, only to jerk back upright again like nothing had happened. Repeat and repeat and repeat. Richie reminded him, then, that technically it was nearing nine, going on ten o’ clock back home. It was OK for

Eddie to go to bed.

“Not unless you are,” he said, which Richie should have expected. If neither of them grew out of their penchant for annoying one another, why would Eddie have grown out of his stubbornness?

“I’ll go to bed if you tell me one thing.”

He took Eddie’s sleepy hum as the sign to keep talking.

“How did you end up out here? Like, back at the hospital -- how did you know...?”

Eddie sat up, stretching his arms over his head until something in his spine-area audibly cracked. As he did, a bit of his pull-over rose up, exposing a thin cut of skin between its hem and his pants. Richie pretended very hard to be looking at the television just then.

Had the heat kicked on?

“You might not believe me if I tell you,” said Eddie.

“We’ve seen a lot of shit, Eds. Try me.”

“Only if you stop calling me that.”

Richie rolled his eyes. “Well then we’d be here all night, wouldn’t we?”

Eddie mumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like “shithead,” but shook his head. He looked more awake now. Not just awake, but alert, like he expected something out of Richie.

“I called Bev because I got... a feeling.”

“What, like a boner?”

“Can you be *serious* ?” Eddie groaned. “I’m trying to be serious. Can you be serious? For five minute? At the very most? Can you?” Richie must have looked as suitably chastised as he felt, for Eddie continued: “I saw a photo of you and there was this... there was this weird

feeling I got in my gut, this nervous, anxious feeling. Like something was wrong.”

Richie waited, expecting more. When Eddie shrugged, giving a gesture like ‘well, that’s it,’ Richie shook his head.

“That’s... that’s it? That’s what happened?”

“That’s what happened.”

“You got anxious looking at a picture of me and told Benverly to go check on me?”

“I told you you wouldn’t believe me.”

“No! No it’s just,” Richie sat up straighter, “You gotta admit, that does sound weird.”

Eddie crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, sure. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you. Because you wouldn’t believe me.”

“I believe you!”

“Do you?”

“Like I said, we’ve seen a lot of shit.” *I’ve seen a lot of shit* . “This by far is the most benign.”

“Ooh, 10 point Scrabble word.”

“Shut the fuck up, I read. I know words.” Richie laughed. It felt good to laugh just because; to laugh because something was funny, not because his life was falling apart and he had to or else he’d fucking lose his mind. “So this... *knowing* feeling --,”

“It’s been since we were kids. Remember the sewers? Remember how I just --,”

“Knew the way?”

“Yeah. Despite Bill having the dad with the blueprints, the plans he could stare at every night and memorize if he wanted, I just... *knew* .”

There was a far-away look in Eddie's eye. "I knew the way through the tunnels like I knew you were in trouble. I told you, I can't explain it. I just knew. Like there was just this tugging. In my heart, I just *knew*."

Richie meant it as a joke, but the tone was all wrong -- too sentimental and heartfelt -- when he teased: "My guardian angel."

A scarlet blush flashed across Eddie's cheeks and nose. "Shut up."

"No, I --," he cleared his throat, suddenly aware of how close the two of them were, "I really appreciate it, Eddie. Without you, I... I don't know..."

He didn't have to complete the thought they were both thinking. Eddie slowly uncrossed his arms to bridge the gap Richie noticed between them. One warm hand (*warm, alive, Eddie*) settled on Richie's own, and like a cranked thermostat, Richie's body temperature went up a million degrees.

"Like I said, Rich... I don't know what's going on. I don't know what's happening, but," Eddie bit his lip. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm-- I'm glad you're here, too, Eddie. Really. I'm-- I'm really glad."

And maybe that would be enough, this time -- simply being here. Together. Maybe there wasn't anything to be afraid of that Pennywise had shown him because it was all just a sham. A vision of fake futures made to fuck with Richie's head when stuck in the Deadlights. And why wouldn't It? That's all It did, all It craved, was to fuck with children and adults alike, to feed on their worst fears.

And what was Richie's, but Eddie? The man who sat before him, eyes shining with something, either tears or determination. Richie could tell, couldn't care. As long as they were shining with life it was enough.

It had to be.

In all his other visions, lived realities, he and Eddie ended horribly. They ended in death and misery and a million other things that made Richie want to tear his hair out and cry until he was wrung dry of

tears. But never in any of his visions did he see something like this, feel something like this warmth; something that poured into his body and heart with a cotton-ball soft touch but a stone-strong sense of grounding. Like he could float away, but had the chance to come back down if he needed.

Alcohol hadn't been enough. Neither had pills. But when he placed his free hand atop Eddie's, sandwiching his smaller palm in the middle of Richie's two giant ones, he thought to himself: *Maybe this will be. Maybe this time.*

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! I'm so sorry for missing an update last week. Work was crazy busy and had me traveling all across the state and participating in a court case which meant I was away from my laptop for most of the time and completely beat when I had a second to write. But it's here now and we see our boys moving forward... but to what?

Also thank you again to those of you who have either left comments here or messaged me on Tumblr about the story! The fact that so many of you love it makes my heart warm and makes it fun to keep writing. <3 Cannot stress it enough how happy your words and support makes me. And, as always, this is self beta'd; if you see any errors, don't hesitate to reach out and tell me!

Laying in Richie's guest bedroom made Eddie somewhat feel like a child on a sleepover again. The bed didn't sit right like it did in New York, the sheets smelled funny like they hadn't been used in awhile, and the shadows on the walls took a little longer to explain away what cast them, *but --*

It was *exciting* .

Especially as Eddie didn't think he'd get this far at all.

Seeing Richie at the hospital was... it was worse than Eddie anticipated. There was something that set Eddie's arm hairs on end, to see a man so usually boisterous and full of life having the vitality of a wet stuffed animal; trying to bring cheer and happiness, but the exterior was so damaged and aged.

He's not damaged. He's hurting. There's a difference .

But over *what* was the \$64,000 question. Despite being tired back on

the couch, Eddie was wide awake now and staring at the ceiling like it held the answer. The city lights danced back and forth on it blank, off-white canvas. He rolled over and unplugged his phone.

There were a few messages from Beverly and Ben, and one from Bill. The first two wanted to know how he was holding up and if Richie was OK. Bill's message was him wondering if Eddie had finally found somewhere to stay for Christmas. Eddie shot back messages to all of them before the anxiety of wondering *is it too late to respond? Would I be bothering them?* got the best of him.

Just for good measure, he shot off a text to Mike too, just to ask how he was doing. It had been a moment since they'd all spoke. It felt wrong to leave them out of the loop. But it also felt wrong to tell anyone about Richie's business -- at least those who didn't already know about it.

The ball was in Richie's court now, as much as it made Eddie squirm, and if he didn't want Mike or Bill to know about any of this, then they wouldn't. That's just how it'd go.

Still, he'd be damned if he didn't get to the bottom of it all. Richie might have been able to yell Beverly away, and hell, he might have even been able to do that to the old, easily cowed Eddie. But this new Eddie, this Eddie now, was brave. Richie had told him so. He had filled him up with the wild notion Eddie could take on anything.

Too bad he didn't know that inspiring Eddie with this bravery would come back to bite him in the butt.

He rolled over and put the phone back on its charger, thinking of sleep. Moments later, Eddie's eyes were back open, reaching for the device. His brain couldn't shut off. Even running down meditation exercises did nothing to stop the springs behind his lids, that kept them flying back open.

The display told him it was just before 1 a.m before it faded into his homescreen.

For the next hour he dozed, time hazily divided between looking at recipe Instagram blogs and nodding off. At some point, he'd ended up

on a website that offered counseling for loved ones of those suffering from alcoholism. He clicked away before the page fully loaded. He fell in and out of dreams that didn't make sense. It left Eddie with dry eyes and a dull headache.

Just shortly after two, sleep claimed him, and he fell headfirst into a

Nightmare.

This had to be a nightmare.

"Eddie." Bev said his name, over and over.

When had she even started? He couldn't remember. All he knew was that there was something wrong and he couldn't stop it. Eddie's grip tightened on the phone in his hand. He didn't recognize where he was standing, but he knew it was someone's home. His, maybe? Or some bastardization of it.

"Bevvie -- Bev, what's --," He couldn't get a word in. She was crying too hard. Eddie touched at his cheeks to find he was crying, too.

"Eddie -- he couldn't, I -- he didn't --,"

"You're not making sense!" He began to walk, but to where, he didn't know. The hallway he stood in seemed to stretch for miles and never did he get any closer to the door at the end. "Beverly, I need you to --,"

"Richie."

Eddie stopped. All at once, Beverly's crying did too.

"What about him? What's wrong with Rich, Beverly?" He pulled the

phone back from his ear to make sure the call hadn't dropped. Eddie turned the volume up to hear nothing but silence. "Hello?"

Nothing. There was nothing on the other line.

Then his hand was on the doorknob, despite never realizing he'd reached the end of the hall. Should he turn it? Did he **want** to? Eddie called Beverly's name into the phone again but no one replied.

"Hello?" Whether he meant to address the phone or whomever was behind the door, Eddie didn't know. His hand shook as he removed it from the knob. But before he could second guess himself further, he grabbed back on it and threw the door open.

Behind it was a stage. Or what Eddie assumed to be a stage. The blackness within the room was so mud-thick he couldn't see past the little that was illuminated from an overhanging light, but for whatever reason, he had the feeling that if he stared long enough, he could make out theatre seats. It reminded him of what he'd seen on cop shows, in interrogation rooms, a regular noir setup. But instead of hanging over a table, it spotlighted a toilet.

A regular, normal, not-scary-at-all toilet.

So why, then, could he not stop shaking? Eddie pulled the phone from his ear and pressed the button to hang up. The time on the call ticked on. He pressed the red dot again. No dice.

"You weren't quick enough."

The voice seemed to come from everywhere and Eddie jumped, looking for its source, rabbit-heart thump thump thumping wildly in his chest.

"H-hello?"

The back of his neck prickled. Eddie turned to see the hallway behind him had disappeared. This couldn't be real. The door he had entered now just showed blackness on the other side, like the jamb had been removed from someone's house and drilled right into the ground of this endless darkness.

This had to be a nightmare. This didn't make sense, it --

"You knew."

*"Knew **what** ?" Eddie yelled into the black. He took some steps forward, only to whirl back around when his stomach rolled with the feeling of wrong-wrong-wrong.*

His phone clattered to the ground.

*Richie was there, on the floor, curled around the front of the toilet in the fetal position. Eddie ran to him, calling his name. There was no other thought in his head, just: **Richie** , and **help him** , and **how** .*

"Rich, I --," Eddie grabbed at Richie's arm, but pulled back as if bitten. He was cold, inhumanely so. Eddie remembered the lake. "Richie?"

He tried again, this time pulling at Richie's button up so that he'd roll over and look at Eddie. He'd look at him and break character and this would all just be another stupid joke. Like when they were kids. Like when they'd play Cowboys and Aliens in the Barrens and Richie would pretend to play dead after being shot with a pebble by whomever was on the other team. He'd yell a great yell, like he was shot for real, and thrash a terrible thrashing like in the throes of a seizure before lying statue-still.

But it was always pretend. Bill or Mike would come over and dig their fingers deep into his armpits and wiggle him back to life with ugly, choking laughs and snorts, the game beginning again. Because that's what it was. A game. Pretend. They were always just pretending.

"Richie?"

This was pretend, too. Or a dream. Because Richie was OK. Eddie had called Bev and made sure that Richie was OK. He had to be OK. He had to be --

"Weren't fast enough."

*"Who the **fuck** is out there?" Eddie snarled.*

His head swiveled this way and that, looking for the source of the noise. But was dark. So, so dark. He turned back to Richie on the floor only to find that Richie was now staring back at him, eyes milky white, like before. Like back in the cistern.

"Rich?" His voice was a breath, softer than butterfly wings. "Richie?"

His phone began to ring again. Eddie blinked and it was in his hands. When had he --

It was up to his ear, then. "Hello?" He couldn't remember answering it.

"Eddie --," Bev's voice. "Eddie, honey, we didn't --,"

"What the fuck is going on, Beverly?" He wasn't scared anymore, but angry. This didn't make sense. None of it made sense. "I'm not screwing around, I --,"

"Richie's dead."

What? No, no he was right here. Sure something was going on but --

"You weren't fast enough."

"What?"

"This is your fault."

"Bev --," She would never speak to him like this. This wasn't real. He had to be dreaming. He had to wake up, he just needed to wake up, he just --

"You can't wake up from this, Eddie." It wasn't Bev's voice anymore but something deeper. Monstrous. "You weren't quick enough and he died. He died Eddie. And it's your fault."

"No!"

"Just look at him, Eddie."

The skin around Richie's mouth was taut, like the skin of a well preserved mummy. Like the skin of the Leper. The Leper. Eddie pulled his hand from where it lay on Richie's chest, above a heartbeat he couldn't feel, when a waxy hand grabbed his wrist.

Richie turned to him, eyes still glazed over.

"Your fault." He rasped. "Didn't notice. Your fault."

Eddie shook his head, which throbbed from unshed tears. "It's not."

*Richie's skeletal fingers came to rest at the curve of Eddie's throat, above his clavicle. They tightened. "Your fault." And tightened. "Your **fault**."*
*And tightened. "**Your fault**." And tightened. "**YOUR FAULT**." And --*

Eddie sucked in a ragged breath, fingers scratching at his own neck before he truly came to. Somehow he'd fallen asleep only to end up tangled in the bed sheets. *Where was --* Richie's spare bedroom. Los Angeles. A flight.

It all came back to him then. He felt a damp slide of sweat between his pectorals and his throat itched for water. It was only a dream. A dream.

He was in L.A. because Richie was OK. Nothing was Eddie's fault. He was *OK* . He slowly reclined back into a lying position to stare at the ceiling and think *breath in, hold for three -- in through the nose out through the mouth*.

The bump-thump of Eddie's nervous heart slowed. He found his phone in the mess of covers and realized he'd only been asleep for about 40-some odd minutes.

"Fuck," he whispered, locking the phone.

He weighed trying to go back to sleep and getting a glass of water. The tack of sweat stuck to his underarms made him itch with the want to get up. *Probably wouldn't hurt to change, too* . He tried to think through how many sleep shirts he'd brought before realizing it didn't matter. If he needed to, he could just ask Richie if it was alright to do laundry here.

Ask the very much alive Richie. Who was OK. And *alive* . Because Eddie was here, in his apartment, in California. With a deep, motivating breath, Eddie untucked himself from bed and padded out to the kitchen.

It took a few tries to find the cups but no time at all to fill it and drain it twice. He was just about halfway through the third refill,

when he paused. The night was relatively quiet, considering big city life. But if Eddie hadn't been listening for it, whether he was aware of it or not, then he might have missed it: A groan, from down the hallway.

Eddie froze, waiting for it to happen again. *Maybe it was just a regular noise ? People make noises in their sleep all the time* . Richie had said he'd been having trouble sleeping. Maybe this was it. Eddie couldn't begrudge him of that; it's not like they hadn't all had their fair share of nightmare inducing experiences. Eddie thought of his dream and the Leper and the dread and the sweat stains still damp on his shirt.

Did Richie still dream of It, too?

He couldn't ponder it further before another moan broke out, more frantic than the last. Eddie's heart sped up. The *clack* his cup made when he set it down pierced through the stifling silence like an arrow shot.

"Rich?" He said, voice hardly louder than a whisper. Eddie tiptoed around the breakfast bar to stand at the foot of the hallway. "Richie?"

Every light was out in the apartment, save for a wall plug-in bulb that illuminated a small patch of floor when it sensed darkness. The bay windows of the living room sent in enough moonlight for that not to be creepy. Still, it took a moment for Eddie's eyes to adjust to the end of the hallway and the beating of his anxious heart to adjust to the dark.

The bathroom door was closed. His throat clenched, dream still fresh in his mind. No light shone from under its crack. For a moment, it was like staring down the maw of the pharmacy's basement. Eddie clenched his jaw.

Nothing is going to come out and get you , he reminded himself. *That was a dream. You're in L.A., with Richie. You're safe. It's OK.*

He counted to ten, then back to one, and let out a breath. He was 40, not four. He knew the dark couldn't hurt him. He knew he was safe here. And he also knew that he didn't fail college physics, that an

object in motion stayed in motion -- so Eddie took a step. Then another. And another.

This isn't like my dream , he reminded himself once at the end of the hallway, *This is real. This is now.*

He stared into the dark of the master bedroom.

“Rich?”

There was no one in the bed. There wasn't even the ability for Eddie to pretend, with the duvet thrown back, exposing well-worn and faded sheets. The anxiety he'd managed to keep tethered got loose from him then, a pack of hunting dogs on the scent, jaws snapping and mouth foaming for *RichieRichieRichie*.

Maybe he'd fallen out of bed? “Rich, buddy?” But nothing was on the floor and no one was in the room. There was only one last place he could check.

He hurried his steps to the bathroom door, then paused, hand on the knob.

“Richie?”

A soft moan sounded from the inside. Eddie's heart steadied slightly.

“Rich, I'm coming in.”

“No,” came a whine. “Eds I'm --.”

Eddie's nose crinkled at the unmistakable sound of vomit hitting toilet water. He pushed the door slightly, making sure he wouldn't strike Richie, before sneaking in and shutting it behind him. Eddie winced at the fluorescent light source on the counter before realizing it was Richie's face down phone with the flashlight on.

It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the miserable sight before him.

While Richie wasn't curled in the fetal position, he was slumped halfway into the toilet like baptizing himself in puke-slop could save

his wretched soul from this miserable... whatever it was. Sickness? Illness? Eddie didn't know. He crouched down beside Richie, hesitant to touch him.

"What happened?"

Richie shook his head. "Nothing. My-- my head."

Duh . Eddie pursed his lips at his own stupidity. "Did the doctor give --," he was cut off by a shush, which morphed into a burp. Eddie waited.

"Too loud." Richie mumbled. "Told to take ibuprofen. Thought I had some but--," he stopped and Eddie could physically hear the sound of Richie's stomach rolling. The thick smell of acidic sickness clotted in the air.

"How long have you been in here?" Eddie asked, voice pitched as low as possible. It took a minute for him to realize that the corresponding slur was Richie asking what the time was.

Eddie reached up and grabbed Richie's phone, careful not to blind either of them. It was shortly after three and he told Richie such, who mumbled back something that sounded like "forty minutes."

"So... you thought you had ibuprofen and--,"

Richie gave a thumbs down.

"You don't?"

Richie turned it into a thumbs up and Eddie sighed. It's not like he could blame Richie. Ibuprofen was on the same level as stocking drive-thru napkins in your car in lieu of real tissue -- had it up until you needed it, then when you needed it most, it was gone. All you had left was a snotty nose and a weird craving for McDonalds.

Eddie placed a hand between Richie's taut shoulder blades. They squeezed tighter an almost imperceptible amount.

"Can I-- do you need anything?"

“Kill me,” Richie moaned.

“What?”

He shook his head, then groaned. “Bad joke.”

“I’ll fuckin’ say,” Eddie mumbled.

“S all I got.”

“No it’s not. Don’t be a baby, Rich.”

He belched into the toilet and the echo of the noise against the porcelain made Eddie wince. He thought Richie might get sick again, but all the other man did was pause before wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Don’t have to stay,” Richie slurred. “I know you don’t like...,” he gestured to nothing over his head, which Eddie took as meaning being sick. He rubbed a circle into the knob of Richie’s spine instead of answering.

“I’m gonna get you water.” Eddie stood.

“There’s baking soda under the sink.”

“What?”

Richie pulled his head away from the toilet. At last, Eddie could make out the bloodshot whites of his eyes, staring unfocused from his lack of glasses. A speck of blood dotted the center of Richie’s lower lip. Eddie watched it move as the other man spoke.

“Baking soda,” Richie said slowly, like each word hurt to get out. “Mix it in. Helps the teeth.”

Eddie wrinkled his nose, wanting to ask how or why Richie knew that, but stopped himself as Richie looked like he was bracing to hurl again. With a quick “I’ll be right back,” Eddie scurried into the kitchen, secretly thankful he’d already found the cups tonight. The baking soda was right where Richie said it would be, too.

Not knowing how much to mix in, Eddie took the hot chocolate approach: one spoonful for every eight-ish ounces. *That's enough, right?* The glass looked to be roughly sixteen ounces -- so he took two spoonfuls, then dipped back in for half of another -- before letting the tap run cold and soaking the powder. Using the same spoon, he whipped the rest of the powder into the water, which now had the look of dissolved chalk.

Upon coming back, Richie had migrated into a sitting position, back against the wall opposite the toilet. His face looked slightly damp, but not sweaty, and the towel crumpled on the counter let Eddie know he at least had enough energy to get up and wash off his face.

"Here," said Eddie, holding the cup eye level with Richie. He grabbed for it, then tried to stand up, staggering slightly. Eddie grabbed for Richie's elbow and was met again with the feeling of too-tightly-tuned guitar string muscles.

"Are you --,"

Richie took a large swig, not swallowing but swishing. He made a face before spitting the concoction down the drain.

"Jesus. You put the whole box in here?"

"You didn't tell me how much!"

Richie huffed out a laugh. "Yeah... guess that's on me then." He took another swig-n-spit, then one more, before putting the mostly empty glass down. He settled back to his position on the floor opposite the toilet. Eddie elected to move to the lip of the tub.

Between them, the phone flashlight still shone, making everything visible but with a horribly washed out tint. Richie, on the floor with his eyes shut and his head lolled back, had the coloring of a Madame Tussauds work. Waxy. Eddie thought again of his dream, of Leper-Richie, then shook it off.

Not real. That wasn't real.

"Feeling better?"

“Hm?” Richie’s eyes fluttered open and his gaze turned to Eddie. “Oh. Yeah, I guess. Comes and goes in waves.”

“You do this a lot?”

“Hang out in toilets? Yeah. I’m a real regular.”

Eddie rolled his eyes. “No, I mean vomiting. That trick with the baking soda, you’d only knew that if you looked it up. Meaning you’ve had a reason to look it up, because you’ve probably had to deal with it a lot.”

“So, like, is risk analyst shorthand for detective or something?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I plead the fifth.”

With a sigh, Eddie rose from the tub to grab the washcloth. He ran the water till it turned just above freezing, then wet it and wrung it out. Folding it into a burrito-like shape, he handed it to Richie.

“Put that wherever it hurts most,” he said. “I’m guessing your eyes, but I’ve been told it feels good on the back of the neck, too.”

“Deal with concussions a lot, then?”

“No, asshole, I just actually read the pamphlet the doctor gave us before leaving the hospital.”

Richie grinned. “Why Eds, you know I can’t read.”

“Shut up,” Eddie shot back, but his words were soft and anyone with ears could hear the smile in his voice. With the washcloth situated over Richie’s eyes, it was easier to talk to him. It took some of the pressure off even if Eddie didn’t quite know why.

“So...,” Richie mumbled. “Are you just going to sit there like a creep all night?”

“Are you?”

“I asked you first.”

“Jesus, how old are you?”

“Old enough.”

“For what?”

“To party.”

Eddie snorted. “Superbad? Really?”

“The fact you knew that says more about you than about me, really. Bad comedy is essentially my brand.”

“Everything bad is your brand.”

“Oh, woof. Still on that trash the trashmouth grind, huh?”

“You know,” Eddie smirked. “Now that you mention it, you do *kinda* look like one of the cops from that movie.”

“Eew. What? No. They both look like fuckin’ dorks.”

“Oh, yeah I forgot, you just *ooze* sex appeal, Richie.”

“Um, *ouch* ? Rude?” Richie snorted, then winced. He drew his legs closer in to himself, washcloth still balanced across his eyes, and placed his chin on the arms drawn atop his knees. “I’ll have you know I’m a *very* hot commodity. I could open my own Victoria’s Secret with all the panties I get mailed to me.”

Richie’s words made his chest tighten.

“You’re fucking disgusting.”

He ignored it.

“Yeah but you love it.”

“Idiot.”

“Got me there.”

With the washcloth pressed to Richie's eyes, Eddie could get away with staring now. From the hospital to now, Richie's pallor hadn't changed much, but he seemed to be getting steadier on his feet. Well, aside from the need for crutches. Seemed to be opening up more to Eddie, too. At least getting more talkative.

Then again, that could just be the drugs wearing off.

But he looked smaller than in Derry, unless Eddie was mistaken. His shoulders were still just as broad, hands just as large, but his face looked a bit thinner. Eyes looked lined, and he just seemed... weary. Tired. Tired, was the word Richie kept using when talking to Eddie. Apparently when talking to Bev, too.

But why? Work, sure he could understand. But this was exhaustion on another level, like it had soaked his soul and made his body carry its damp, heavy burden.

"Y'still here?" Richie's voice was thick with sleep.

"Still here."

"I think... I think I'm gonna be OK for the rest of the night. Like, if you want to go to bed."

Eddie's knees cracked as he stood from the lip of the tub. "Let's get you tucked in first."

"Oh Doctah K makes a reappearance!"

Richie's Brooklyn accent had improved slightly over the years but it was still as piss-poor as ever. Or maybe it was just because Eddie was used to hearing a *real* Brooklyn accent, almost on the daily, and had somewhat developed his own dialect just shy of Bostonian as a result.

But *god*, was it still bad, and Eddie told him so.

"You're just jealous."

"Of what?"

“Exactly.”

Eddie huffed and exasperated laugh as Richie pulled the cloth from his eyes. The swelling hadn't gone down any in that short period of time, not that Eddie had expected it to, but Richie's eyes looked more focused in the half-light of the dim bathroom.

He held out a hand which Richie shrugged off.

Eddie's nose wrinkled.

“Let me help you up.”

“I'm fine.”

“You're not *fine* .”

“Eddie, seriously,” the name -- his full name -- speared him, not unlike when a parent pulled out the first and middle name to yell. Eddie pulled back. “I'm OK, man. Just old and aching. Nothing outside the realm of my ordinary.”

But what have I done?

“You're not old, you're 40.”

“Almost 41.” He looked to be putting all his weight on the uninjured foot, using it to push against the ground as he slid up the drywall. “I'm practically ancient compared to you.”

“I'm also 40,” Eddie said, then quieter, “shithead.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and watched Richie limp to the door. Opening it, he gestured for Eddie to go first as he flushed the toilet. They paused outside the bathroom door. Neither of them looked certain like they knew what to do next, or at least, that's how Eddie read the situation.

“Do you--,” he started to say, at the same time Richie lead with, “Well, I guess that --,”

They stopped. Richie blinked, eyes looking far less owlsh as they

weren't hidden behind his inch-thick glasses. With the moon shining in through Richie's open window, Eddie looked at him head on and saw a different man. The same face, the same clothes, the same humor -- but different.

His strong jaw, coarse with salt-n-pepper stubble, flexed slightly like he was biting back a comment.

Eddie pressed on. "What were you going to say?"

They were standing close enough that he could feel the wisp-ends of Richie's baking soda breath fan across Eddie's face. All things considered, it was disgusting. There was nothing heart-stopping about this moment. Yet, maybe it was the way the shadows played across Richie's face, because for a minute, Eddie could see both the child and the man on the same face, in the same body.

He could see the boy who made his stomach hurt from giggling and the older, more wary version -- the one that made Eddie's heart ache with sympathy. Or was it empathy? He could never get the two straight.

"Uh, well -- I mean," he looked over Eddie's shoulder as he spoke, "Are you tired?"

"Huh?"

"I dunno about you, but like, this shit put the wind back in my sails dude."

"What are you saying?"

"I dunno." His attention focused back in. "Wanna... watch a movie or something?"

Eddie frowned. "You can't."

"Says *who* ?"

"Says your fucking doctors, moron."

"Oh, posh."

Eddie laughed, incredulous. “ *Posh* ? How *old* are you?”

“We’ve established this, Eds. I’m 40 and I’m dying. I’m fucking ancient.”

“You’re not dying,” he said, the humor having left his voice. “Not while I’m around.”

Richie leaned back against the now closed door and looked down at Eddie from the bridge of his nose. It made his jaw look unfairly more prominent, which Eddie tried not to think too much about. And especially now, with the short crop of his hair -- which honestly was still taking some getting used to -- that framed his face, making his cheekbones look even more pronounced...

It gave Eddie a lot to work with.

“So what? You’re just going to stay here for the rest of your life?”

Drawing himself higher, Eddie tried to give the impression he was more convincing than he felt.

“I told you, I’ve banked a lot of vacation time.”

“So you’ve said.”

Richie pushed away from the door, electing to swing an arm around Eddie’s shoulders. The movement was so abrupt it almost made Eddie jump. Instead, he found himself leaning into the warmth of Richie’s broad bicep slung ‘round the back of his neck. He bore most of the weight as Richie tried to take the strain off his injured foot.

“No movies, though,” Eddie reminded. He deposited Richie on the side of the bed that looked most thoroughly used. “You can’t fuck up your head any more, OK? I don’t think you can make it through life with one usable brain cell.”

“Hasn’t stopped me up until this point.” Richie pillowed his head on his arms, watching Eddie walk to the foot of the bed. His eyes looked wolf-like in the cool moonlight though his body gave more the impression of a wounded deer.

What a walking contradiction, Eddie thought to himself. The sad funnyman. The carnivorous prey animal.

He paused when he realized there was nowhere else to sit in the room but Richie's bed. Eddie eyed it warily.

"C'mon, " Richie said after a moment, as if he sensed Eddie's discomfort. "It'll be like when we were kids, all piling on to someone's bed to watch *Jason V*."

"That movie didn't come out until like, way after we graduated college."

"Eh, tomato to *mah* to. All those fucking movies are the same anyways." Richie gave the top of the duvet a pat. "Get in loser, we're going movie watching."

Eddie shook his head. "Jesus Christ. You and your fuckin' movie references."

"There's a reason I moved out to Hollywood, baby."

"You live in L.A."

Richie gave another pat-pat to the bed covers.

"C'mon."

"Oh my god."

Another pat-pat-pat.

"C'mon, Eds."

With a groan and a quick "*ohmygodshutup*," Eddie threw himself on the bed, far enough away where Richie could roll if he wanted to but close enough that Eddie wouldn't upend himself by sliding onto the floor. He pulled himself into a seated position with his back to the headboard.

Richie flicked on the flatscreen. Some jewelry infomercial began droning on about ethically sourced diamonds. He then threw the

remote at Eddie without looking at him, smacking him in the knee in the process and making Eddie yelp.

Rather than dignify it with a curse or response, Eddie did the mature thing and stuck his tongue out at the outline of Richie's back. He had turned to face the wall, not quite away from the TV but not quite facing it, which satisfied Eddie not a lot, but enough.

He began flicking through the channels, paying attention to a single face that passed their way. Trash. Trash. Something starring Diane Lane. Trash. A rerun of "Modern Family." A never-ending P90X infomercial.

"Rich, is there even anything fucking *good* on at this hour?"

The lump on the other side of the bed gave a mumbled groan which Eddie equated to: "How the hell am I supposed to know?"

So much for staying up and watching a movie. Eddie rolled his eyes.

He finally settled in on "Golden Girls," but it didn't matter anyways as he'd already seen every episode. Twice. It was about halfway through watching Jean tell Dorothy she's a lesbian that Eddie realized it was nearing 4 a.m. and it was probably time to go back to his own room.

Sparing a glance at Richie, Eddie's heart drew tight like well-laced boots. Richie had rolled over at some point to face Eddie, but his eyes were shut and relaxed, sleep having long since taken him. The lines in his face had smoothed out some and the boy Eddie thought he'd seen in the hallway was back: mouth agape, drooling on the fitted sheets, one hand curled under his chin like it'd keep his neck warm.

He wanted to touch. His palms, his fingers, itched for it. But Eddie was also not a dumb man; he'd read the myth of Icarus. The idea of being burned scared him. And there was safety back in his own bed.

Eddie clicked the volume down to almost nothing and set the remote beside him, just out of Richie's reach. His breath, and Eddie's heartbeat, were the loudest sounds in the room. Eddie looked back to Richie. In a few hours, two, maybe more, the sun would be up and

this spell would break. The lines would return to Richie's face and his palms would ache -- and Eddie's would too -- but for different reasons.

He closed his eyes and listened to the raspy squeak of Richie's snore. Some time passed before he opened them again. The sky looked lighter, but in the first breaths of dawn, everything tended to look the same. Eddie flicked off the television and inched slowly to the edge of the bed.

Richie's voice stopped him. "Where'yu goin'?"

His sleep-thick voice sent a wave down Eddie's spine; something he knew but didn't want to put a name to.

"Back to my bed, dude," Eddie whispered. "Go to sleep."

"No ." Richie's arm wormed out from its too-high-a-thread-count cocoon and Eddie didn't try to stop him as calloused fingers tangled, vine-like, around his wrist. "Stay here."

Eddie's face heated, feeling the warmth from his chin to his ears. He stared at their point of connection: hand against wrist, palm around pulse point. Were Richie more awake, he might have been able to feel the sudden spike in Eddie's heart rate.

"Are you sure? You have another bed --,"

Richie's eyes were still closed but his grip tightened, still soft and easily breakable, but still so strong that Eddie thought he might collapse.

"Sleep." He tugged. "G'nna make sure yr'ok,"

Eddie stilled. His own brain was foggy from the half-sleep he'd just experienced. "OK? Why wouldn't I be OK, Rich?"

"It won't happen a'gn."

"What? "

Even though Richie was physically there, he was already gone. His

grip on Eddie didn't falter. When he made to move his wrist, Richie's hold reflexively tightened and his brow knit together.

What wouldn't happen again?

Make sure he was OK?

It could have been the ramblings of a man deep in the throes of sleeptalk, but Eddie didn't think it was. With all the force of a snowflake landing on an eyelash, he shook Richie's grasp on his wrist -- but he didn't leave. Eddie moved down the bed, electing to lean on a propped forearm rather than lie down completely. This angle allowed him to watch Richie's until his face settled back into its previously lax state.

Again, Eddie found himself with his hand half outstretched, except for physically this time: wanting to touch, to feel. But for all the bravery Richie had bestowed to him -- it wasn't enough.

Not yet.

It was enough, though, to push him off the dock of uncertainty and steer his boat in the right direction. That had to be enough. For now.

He pushed Richie's hand back under the cover, but let his own fingers linger.

Author's Note:

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